

Journalists Sue U.S. On Prison Interviews

By James H. Mann
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A group of journalists filed suit against Attorney General John N. Mitchell yesterday in a court challenge to the Justice Department's policy prohibiting press interviews with inmates of federal prisons.

The group claimed that the policy violates freedom-of-the-press guarantees of the First Amendment and "interferes with the community's right to know the views of prison inmates."

Nine federal prison inmates joined the reporters in the suit, claiming that their First Amendment rights of free expression are also denied when the Bureau of Prisons denies them the right to talk to reporters.

A spokesman for the Justice Department confirmed last night that it has been "long-standing policy" to prohibit members of the press from interviewing inmates. The spokesman said the department has no comment on the suit.

The suit alleges that interviews with prisoners are permitted in the New York City prisons and in the state prisons of New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, California, Tennessee, Maine and elsewhere.

The federal prison system, the suit maintains, "is of particular public concern because of the nature of the prisoners therein (e.g., war resisters, so-called 'white-collar offenders,' and so forth) because such system is frequently considered a model for other systems, and because it is the only system supported by the taxes of all the people of this nation."

"Recently, there has been

much discontent with the operation of this system on the part of both officials and prisoners," the suit alleges. It says that recent requests for interviews with inmates by the reporters who filed suit have been either turned down or ignored.

Among the reporters filing suit was Tom Wicker, New York Times columnist. Wicker was a member of the observers committee last September during the disturbances at the Attica Correctional facility.

The other reporters in the suit were Donald Singleton of the New York Daily News; Nat Hentoff, Jack Newfield and Paul Cowan of the Village Voice; and Betty Medsger of The Washington Post.

Two publishing organizations, The Amsterdam News and Playboy Enterprises, Inc. (publishers of Playboy magazine) also joined as plaintiffs.

The reporters and inmates are being represented by attorneys of the American Civil Liberties Union. An ACLU attorney said last night the suit is a part of the ACLU's "prison reform project," of which the Playboy Foundation is a major financial backer.

Norman A. Carlson, director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons, was named a co-defendant along with Mitchell.

The suit was assigned to U.S. District Court Judge John Lewis Smith Jr.

Mexican Shoot-Out

Reuter

MEXICO CITY, Jan. 19—Two urban guerrillas and a policeman died yesterday during a three-hour gun battle in Monterrey, about 600 miles north of Mexico City.