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U.S.

Airmail via Drones Is Vexing for Prisons

By MICHAEL S. SCHMIDT APRIL 22, 2015

BISHOPVILLE, S.C. — During the graveyard shift at 1:44 a.m., security cameras at the prison here picked up the blinking lights of an unidentified flying object approaching the facility's fence.

A corrections officer was dispatched to investigate, but by the time she got there, all she could see was a man running away into the dense forest that surrounds the prison.

It was not until dawn that officers found a package that included a cellphone, tobacco and marijuana tangled in the power lines outside the prison and a small drone that had crashed in the bushes nearby. In the woods, investigators located a makeshift campground, the remote control device used to fly the drone, a bottle of grape-flavored Gatorade and drugs.

“It was a delivery system,” said Bryan P. Stirling, the director of the South Carolina Department of Corrections, explaining how the drone's operators had planned to send the contraband into the prison, the Lee Correctional Institution. “They were sending in smaller amounts in repeated trips. They would put it on there, they would deliver it, someone inside would get it somehow, and they would send it back out and send more in.”

It is the high-tech version of smuggling a file into a prison in a birthday cake, and it underscores the headache that drones are now creating for law enforcement and national security officials, who acknowledge that they have few, if any, ways of stopping them.

Drones flying over prison walls may not be the chief concern of corrections officials. But they say that some would-be smugglers are experimenting with the technique as an alternative to established methods like paying off officers, hiding contraband in incoming laundry and throwing packages disguised as rocks over fences into recreational yards.

The authorities have detected at least three similar attempts at corrections facilities in the United States in the past two years. In the same period, there were also at least four reported attempts abroad, in Ireland, Britain, Australia and Canada.

In January, guards found a drone with blue and red flashing lights on the ground inside a recreational yard at a prison in Bennettsville, S.C., according to investigative reports. On that drone were 55 grams of synthetic marijuana and a cellphone charger, the reports said.

Law enforcement officials say they have no way of knowing how many attempts have been successful, but the warden of the Lee Correctional Institute, Cecilia Reynolds, said that in recent weeks her officers found 17 phones in one inmate's cell. She said she suspected that the phones continue to come in on drones.

"We've got to do something about this — these cellphones are killing us," she said.

Smartphones are so desirable to inmates because unlike pay phones at prisons, they are not recorded or monitored. The phones also allow them to watch pornography and communicate surreptitiously with fellow prisoners.

The phones are essential for coordinating with smugglers using drones, because the prisoners need to know where to find the deliveries in the yard. The prisoners can then use the phones to quickly pay their suppliers.

The problems that cellphones create were exposed in February during a nine-hour riot at the prison here in Bishopville. Inmates took control of a part of their dormitory after they stabbed two officers and assaulted three others. Before the authorities could regain control of the facility, the inmates called a local television

station from their cellphones, claiming they were holding other inmates hostage. The inmates then sent the television station photos of the hostages and the destruction they had done to the dorm.

Ever since a hobbyist drone crashed on the South Lawn of the White House in January, there has been an increased push by law enforcement agencies, companies and privacy watchdogs to come up with ways to restrict the flight of drones. That task has been particularly difficult because the laws and regulations that govern drones are outdated and confusing.

“It’s a new area and we don’t know the full extent of drones’ capabilities — both good and bad — and because of that we don’t know what the gaps are in the laws and what we need to do to clarify them,” said Lisa Ellman, who helps lead the unmanned aircraft systems practice group at the law firm McKenna, Long & Aldridge in Washington.

Nets cannot be built over every sensitive location in the United States to keep drones out. So, for now, the best way to control the problem appears to be “geofencing” software that prevents the drones from flying over a specific location.

DJI, the company that manufactured the drone that crashed at the White House, announced in March that its new geofencing software would make its devices inoperable within roughly 16 miles of the White House. The company said it was working to create similar no-fly zones for “sensitive institutions and national borders.”

An organization called No Fly Zone has introduced a website where individuals, business owners and others who do not want drones overhead can enter their addresses into a database. Those addresses will be provided to drone manufacturers who have agreed to program their devices not to fly over those locations.

For several years, officials at the prison here have tried to deter people from throwing objects over its fences by installing dozens of beehives in the woods around it. In front of the hives are signs saying: “Danger! Bees! Keep Out!”

But in response to the drone incidents, the authorities in South Carolina have taken several measures that they say will make it harder for drones to fly over their prisons. For example, they said that with the backing of Gov. Nikki R. Haley they had built hulking new towers that enable officers to look outward into the areas around the state's correction facilities.

"It's almost like we need an Iron Dome like Israel has to stop it," Mr. Stirling said, referring to the multibillion-dollar rocket interceptor system that was used to protect Israel during its most recent conflict with Hamas. "But they have a robust defense budget."

After the drone incident here last April, investigators found a receipt from a convenience store at the campground where the smugglers were hiding. The investigators went to the store and obtained images of the men from surveillance cameras.

Two months later, they arrested one of the men, Brenton Lee Doyle, who is now serving his sentence at another state prison. That arrest led the authorities to a second man, who was arrested last week in Tennessee.

Mr. Stirling said he never expected to have to learn so much about drones when he became the head of the state's prison system in 2013.

"When I started in this job it was all very futuristic — Amazon wasn't even talking that much at that point of using them to make deliveries," he said. "Now it's something we're having to devote extensive resources to."

"We put up higher fences to stop people from throwing things over them," he said. "Now they're just flying over them."

Kitty Bennett contributed research.

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