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## OPINION | Ruth Hopkins: Are private prisons the next arms deal scandal?

Ruth Hopkins

news24

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The Mangaung Correctional Centre in Bloemfontein.

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South Africa pays foreign contractors billions of rand to run and maintain private prisons. Recent events suggest it may be the next arms deal, writes investigative journalist **Ruth**

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On 7 August this year, one of the worst prison fires ever in the history of prisons in South Africa took place at Kutama-Sinthumule prison in Makhado, run by the American GEO Group.

Frustrated prisoners who had drafted an explosive memorandum listing their complaints started the fire when the main author of the memorandum was placed in an isolation cell. The prison burnt down for the fourth time since it opened in 2002. All 3 024 prisoners had to be transferred to other prisons in the country.

The fire followed on the heels of one of the most spectacular escapes ever in the history of prisons in South Africa. This involved the "other" private prison, **Mangaung prison in Bloemfontein**, run by G4S, which used to be British until it was bought by American Allied Universal in 2021.

At the end of March, the news broke that convicted fraudster, murder and rapist Thabo Bester had escaped from Mangaung prison by faking his suicide. Bester defrauded hundreds of people through scam companies that he ran from Mangaung prison with his lover Nandipha Magudumana. He escaped with the help of many corrupted G4S officials.

In May, this led to the early termination of the concession contract G4S signed with the South African government in 2001.

It was not the first time Mangaung prison made headlines for all the wrong reasons. In 2013, the correctional facility was taken over by the government for 10 months because widespread labour unrest and disorder had ground the prison operation to a standstill. Prisoners were being tortured, assaulted and forcibly injected with a substance that made them "**walk and talk like robots or zombies**".

The Department of Correctional Services (DCS) established a task team that investigated these issues. They found proof of all the allegations, but refused to release the investigation report. It had to be accessed through a court order and was finally released, seven years after the report was compiled.

According to DCS, these two prisons cost the South African state nearly R1 billion a month. Mangaung and Kutama-Sinthumule are for-profit prisons and that profit flows back to America.

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Allied Universal is the biggest private security contractor in the world, with an annual revenue of \$18 billion. GEO Group is one of the bigger private prison multinationals in the world, with an annual revenue of \$2.5 billion.

They have a problematic track record in their home countries as well. In 2018, G4S-run Birmingham prison in the UK was taken over by the state following the outbreak of violence and



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infested, and racist. The company no longer runs these two prisons. G4S was also prosecuted in the UK for defrauding the British government in its electronic monitoring contract.

GEO Group's track record is not much better. In 2021, a judge ordered the multinational to pay migrants in its American for-profit detention centres the minimum wage instead of the \$1 a day wage the publicly listed company thought was a reasonable salary.

Detention Watch Network, an NGO that documents prison and detainee abuse, named a GEO Group immigrant detention centre outside Los Angeles the "deadliest ICE detention centre" in 2017. GEO Group has been accused of torture, abuse, bad medical care, as well as suspicious deaths in its American facilities.

The South African case seems to fit in with G4S and GEO Group's domestic track records. Both Mangaung and Kutama-Sinthumule prisons have experienced repeated strikes, complaints about torture, corruption, forced medication, and suspicious deaths.

Some documented incidents are shocking In 2005, for example, prisoner Isaac Nelani was tortured to death in the cell next to the one Bester escaped from. G4S and SAPS officials worked together to cover up the murder, presenting it as a suicide.

Hopkins writes:

**These kinds of gross human rights violations take place in South Africa, with its painful history of apartheid-era prison torture, with very little public outrage taking place or pertinent questions being asked.**

Are private prisons the next arms deal in South Africa? The arms deal was a corruption scandal that happened when a newly democratic South Africa reorganised its military and signed contracts worth R30 billion with European companies such as UK military contractor BAE systems.

The SA government spends close to R1 billion a month on the two for-profit prisons that have been in the country for more than 20 years. It is therefore safe to conclude the private prisons scandal involves more money than the arms deal.

European arms companies and prominent South African politicians fraudulently manipulated the procurement of arms, in return for bribes that have been estimated at \$300 million. The arms deal was prosecuted but only led to two convictions, sustaining a legacy of impunity in public administration.

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Over the years, in four- or five-year intervals, prisoner riots, labour strikes and fires have broken out at Kutama-Sinthumule prison, yet the Judicial Inspectorate for Correctional Services (JICS) and DCS have for years given the correctional facility positive reviews.

Both G4S/Allied Universal and GEO Group are contractually not allowed to communicate with the media. GEO Group's South African representative Kelley Starke rather opted to contact me after News24 published the first instalment of a series about Kutama-Sinthumule. She demanded a retraction and correction of factual allegations. She also threatened legal action, and demanded that News24 never publish my work again.

The real apology, however, should not be offered by me, but by these financially very powerful multinationals who, openly and blatantly, earn a profit off taxpayer's money yet are unable to keep their workforce or inmate population satisfied.

- Ruth Hopkins is the founding editor of the [Private Security Network](#), a transnational network of investigative journalists focused on the global private security sector.

- This investigation was done in association with Truth First, a non-profit organisation that promotes investigative journalism.



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