U.S. attorney reviews '88 Angola probe by state police

By JOHN SEMIEN and MARK LAMBERT
Advocate staff writers

Reports on an aborted 1988 state police probe of alleged fraud, theft and malfeasance at the state prison at Angola are under scrutiny by the U.S. attorney, who is investigating prison operations at the request of a federal judge.

U.S. Attorney Raymond Lamonica on Thursday confirmed that he is reviewing reports from Louisiana State Police investigators who interviewed guards and other employees at Angola in 1988 as part of the probe. Lamonica said that while the state police probe focused on criminal violations, his interest is in how those violations may have affected the day-to-day operations of Angola.

The civil proceeding is going to look at criminal activity on the part of inmates and state employees to determine the impact upon the proper running of the prison," Lamonica said.

"We are not presently looking at this activity as violations of federal criminal laws." Lamonica said he could not rule out the possibility that criminal charges will result from what he describes as "a civil matter."

U.S. District Judge Frank Polozola, who ordered the investigation of Angola, has scheduled a Friday hearing on how the federal probe will be conducted.

In a July 1, 1988, synopsis of the state investigation of Angola, Louisiana State Police Capt. Joe Folse said the Angola investigation stemmed from a probe into pardons selling by former Pardon Board Chairman Howard Marsellus.

"The Marsellus probe "indicated the possibility of criminal wrongdoing by Angola employees," Folse said. "We made administrative recommendations on how the Louisiana Department of Corrections could remedy the misuse of USDA commodities by Angola employees, the misclassification of security officers at the prison and the general misuse and theft of state food." Folse also recommended tighter controls on the remodeling of state-owned residences.

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AFeb. 26, 1988, report on the Angola interviews from state police Investigator Joseph A. Whitmore to Capt. Michael R. Roop said they began on Jan. 5, 1988, at the request of former Secretary of Corrections C. Paul Phelps. Folse made administrative recommendations on how the Louisiana Department of Corrections could remedy the misuse of USDA commodities by Angola employees, the misclassification of security officers at the prison and the general misuse and theft of state food.

Folse also recommended tighter controls on the remodeling of state-owned residences. The other areas cited in Whitmore's report included:

• Possible connections between Angola officials and Marsellus "regarding narcotic traffic and payoffs,"
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After extensive federal and state probes, Marsellus pleaded guilty in state court to conspiracy, bribery and extortion charges. He is serving five years in a federal prison.

Folse said several witnesses in the Marsellus probe "indicated the possibility of criminal wrongdoing by Angola employees." Folse made administrative recommendations in the synopsis but said his investigators found no evidence of criminal wrongdoing on the part of Angola employees.

But he said six weeks of interviews with Angola employees "pointed out the need for more in-depth examination" of allegations of fraud, theft and malfeasance.

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In the report, Whitmore said the interviews ceased on Feb. 15, 1988, and that there were other areas of possible criminal activity that needed further investigation.

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other ranking employees.
• Prison supervisors selling leave
time to employees.
• The misuse of state-owned housing,
utilities and linetelephones.
• The possible falsification of time
and attendance records by employees
working on the medical and mental
health staff.

In the report, Whitmore said it had
been difficult to obtain information
from Angola employees in the first
weeks of the probe, but “during the final
weeks of the investigation, employees
were speaking more freely... because
employees were under the impression
that state police would remain on said
investigation until Angola and the
Angola administration was thoroughly
investigated.

“IT appears that many of the
employees at Angola are willing to
cooperate with investigators should state
police pursue further investigation,” Whitmore said in the
report.

J.C. Willie, who was state police
commander at the time of Whitmore’s
investigation, said Thursday that Phelps referred the findings of the
investigation to Angola officials for an internal investigation.

“It was turned over to Mr. Phelps, and he turned it over to Angola internal
affairs,” said Willie, who has since retired from the state.

Angola Warden Hilton Butler said
Thursday he knew the state police were
investigating the facility in 1988, but he
said he never was given a copy of any
investigation reports.

“IT never did see anything out of it
at all,” Butler said. “I do know they
were up here around the Marsellus
investigation. After that, they stayed
around for quite a while.”

Phelps on Thursday said he made
several requests for state police
investigations of employees at Angola
and could not recall the specifics of
Whitmore’s activities in January and

Phelps denied calling off the state
police investigation.

“(Former state police Commander
Wiley) McCormick used to complain
that I was using too much time from
his investigators,” he said. “No way
would I start an investigation and call it
off.”

Phelps said that in early 1988, his own
internal investigations were hampered
by state and federal probes involving
prison officials. Phelps said he did ask
investigators to speed their work so that
he could resume his own work.

The Angola probe was resumed later
in 1988 and again ended at the request of
Secretary of Corrections Bruce Lynn,
according to state police spokesman
Ronnie Jones.

“A number of reports were filed from
early spring through midsummer 1988,” Jones said Thursday. “On June
17, Mr. Lynn called the lead
investigator to his office to discuss the
progress of his investigation.

“It’s my understanding that the
investigator, in discussing the case with
Mr. Lynn, advised him there was cause
for further investigation,” he said.

Jones said Lynn told the investigator
that the problems uncovered by the
probe amounted to “poor management
and minor violations.”

“He said no further investigation was
required and said the investigation
should be stopped,” Jones said.

Lynn on Thursday said he asked state
police investigators to resume the
Angola probe because they could not tell
him who ordered it closed and “I
thought maybe there was some reason
they had been pulled off before.”

Lynn said he stopped the
investigation after consulting with state
county that police officials who said they were not
generating results.

“They said, ‘We can keep on going, but
we’re running into dead ends,’” Lynn
said. “I couldn’t see where we were
accomplishing anything by just
investigating. If they had said further
investigation was warranted I wouldn’t
have stopped them.”

Polozola cited an alarming increase
in inmate murders, suicides and escapes
in an order last month in declaring a
state of emergency at Louisiana State
Penitentiary at Angola.

In the order, Polozola appointed
former Angolawarden Ross Maggio as
an expert on prisons and asked
Lamonica and the U.S. Department of
Justice to assist Maggio in an
investigation of operations at the
maximum-security