The maximum-security area at the Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola is surrounded by okra fields.

Angola: No negotiating

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BATON ROUGE — Louisiana State Penitentiary inmates, wanting "another St. Martinville," never had a chance of being released as the Cuban detainees were, says the head of state prisons.

Richard Stalder, secretary of the Department of Corrections, said in an interview that he believes the inmates told hostage Sgt. Redd F. Walker "this is going to be another St. Martinville" because they hoped to be able to negotiate a lesser penalty once their escape attempt failed.

"They had to realize that after murdering Capt. (David C.) Knapp what their fate would be," Stalder said.

Tuesday night, six inmates at the prison in Angola overpowered and killed a guard who refused to turn over his keys. They took two guards as hostages for about two hours before an assault team stormed rooms and killed an inmate who charged officers with a knife in his hand. Another hostage-taker was seriously wounded but is expected to live, prison officials said.

Warden Burt Cain said the Angola inmates' only demand was to be released like the Cuban detainees in St. Martinville after FBI negotiations.

"They thought it would work for them like it did over there, but it didn't work here," the warden said. "If they kill one, they'll kill others, so we just took them. We don't negotiate for hostages. If you do, you make the whole place unstable. All the inmates know that."

"Every situation is different," Stalder said when asked about the inmates' demand of having "another St. Martinville."

One of the major differences, he said, is that the inmates at Angola were convicted of serious felonies, mostly murder, and the Cuban detainees had not been convicted of crimes.

"Their primary aim was to escape," he said of the Angola inmates. "I think they took hostages only after their escape was foiled. I don't think you can call this mimicking St. Martinville."

 Asked whether the solution to the St. Martin crisis concerns prison officials about what Cain called a "copacetic" hostage effort, Stalder said, "Every jail and prison was paying close attention to what was going on in St. Martinville. We're all concerned about that incident generating other incidents" but he doesn't believe there was any direct tie to Tuesday's situation at Angola.

The Angola inmates wanted to escape but when Knapp refused to turn over his keys, they beat him to death with a hammer.

Any chance of negotiations

Please see ANGOLA on Page 9A

Please see Pages 8A & 9A:
- Feds: No connection
- Experts: Outcomes inevitable
ended when Knapps’ body was discovered, Stalder said, because “we knew that our remaining staff members were in peril.”

Cain ended about 10 minutes of negotiations after finding the body of Knapps, 49, a 12-year veteran. The inmates had been offered amnesty if they would release the hostages and go back to their cells.

Stalder said he and Cain, along with deputy wardens Paul Perkins and Jimmy Johnson, forced open the door to the building where the hostages were held. They were accompanied by a 70-to-80-man assault squad that had surrounded the education building and moved in under the cover of darkness.

When they recognized Perkins through a window, inmates holding Lt. Douglas Chaney in a classroom fell on the floor and put their hands behind their heads, Stalder said.

One of the inmates in the room said they wouldn’t let him go if they saw what was in the bathroom, said Kathy Jett, a prison spokeswoman. That’s where Stalder and officers found Knapps’ body.

Walker, Stalder said, was held in a nearby storeroom by Joel Durham, 26, who was serving a life sentence for a first-degree murder conviction in Jefferson Parish, and David Mathis, in his 20s, who is serving a life sentence for a second-degree murder conviction in East Baton Rouge Parish. They are believed to have been the ringleaders in the attempted escape and responsible for Knapps’ murder.

The assault team lobbed a concussion grenade into the room, which distracted the pair long enough for team members to enter. Durham, who charged with a knife, was shot and killed. Mathis was shot in the face and was in serious condition at a hospital Wednesday.

“We had to do something before they could harm Sgt. Walker,” Stalder said.

Chaney and Walker were unhurt in the siege that started as inmates were to attend classes and meetings, including Alcoholics Anonymous, in the prison’s Education Building.

The inmates were attempting to escape from Camp D, a medium security unit at the sprawling prison along the Mississippi River in the Tunica Hills region northwest of St. Francisville.

Gov. Mike Foster ordered that all flags be flown at half-staff in honor of Knapps.

“This brave man valued the safety of Louisiana citizens more than his life,” the governor said. “He is a true hero.”

Stalder said Knapps’ sacrifice is “a chilling and somber reminder of the collective call to duty that our staff answers every day to preserve the safety of the citizens of our state.”

Cain called Knapps a martyr who gave his life rather than give up his keys. He said it was the first hostage situation he had experienced in 18 years of working in prisons.

Knapps was the first Angola guard killed in the line of duty since April 1972, when security officer Brent Miller was stabbed to death.

The four wounded inmates were in solitary “lockdown” Wednesday, Jett said.