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Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | May 28, 2011

We've just come across a widely circulated article from Agence France-Presse, published on May 18 while Dominique Strauss-Kahn was still languishing on Rikers Island, entitled [Strauss-Kahns Suicide Watch Cell Tiny, Isolated](#). Here, some highlights from the story:

Under suicide watch, Dominique Strauss-Kahn wears a specially designed jumpsuit and lives in a tiny cell, monitored by a guard positioned just a few steps away, sources said Wednesday. The 11 x 13 foot (3.3 x 3.9 meters) cell is in the West Facility of the infamous Rikers Island prison, located in Manhattan's swirling East River. [Strauss-Kahn] is considered a suicide risk and has been placed on special guard.

Ordinarily, a suspect awaiting trial, considered innocent until proven guilty, is detained with numerous privileges, including the right to wear his own clothes and bring in possessions. Not Strauss-Kahn. A law enforcement source, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told AFP that the 62-year-old VIP has been placed in an area normally reserved for inmates with contagious diseases.

That's because the layout, with cells designed to isolate prisoners as much as possible, suits the requirements in this extraordinarily high profile case. So in that tiny space he has in addition to his bed a shower and toilet and table for eating. And he is entirely alone. Or almost. There's no one else there except guards. In this case, there is a guard just a very few feet away, the source said.

The French politician, who denies all charges, is allowed to exercise one hour daily outside. He also has the run of a day room where he can watch television, including the nearly non-stop news coverage of his own case.

Norman Seabrook, president of the correction officers union, said everything was being done to protect Strauss-Kahn from suicide and other inmates on Rikers.

The article was only one of many in the overseas press depicting Rikers Island as an almost mythically dark and menacing place, though the descriptions often don't quite measure up to the hype. One [British](#) piece called Rikers a penal colony, and continued: Rikers is harsh, loud and dangerous, according to those who know the island jail well. Its crowded and the food is terrible, Gerald Lefcourt, a well-known defence lawyer, told Reuters. There are really heavy-duty prison bars and gates that make a lot of clanging sounds every time they are open and closed.'

In fact, DSK's cell, at 11 x 13, or 143 square feet, is well over twice the size of the isolation cells in the Louisiana Prison system, where [Herman Wallace and Albert Woodfox](#) have spent 39 years in solitary; those cells measure approximately 6 x 9, or 54 square feet. The cell at ADX Florence federal supermax where [Thomas Silverstein](#) is approaching his third decade in solitary is 7 x 12, or 84 square feet. Few cells where American prisoners spend months, years, or decades in isolation are as large as that in which Dominique Strauss-Kahn spent a few days.

As for other prisoners on suicide watch, they are on occasion confined in what have been called squirrel cage tiny enclosures so small that their occupants cannot lie down, where they are sometimes left to stand in their own excrement. Such cages, measuring 3 x 3 feet, were cited in a case in Louisiana last year, and in the Supreme Court decision on California's prisons that came down earlier this week. Writing for the majority in *Brown v. Plata*, Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy [stated](#): Because of a shortage of treatment beds, suicidal inmates may be held for prolonged periods in telephone-booth sized cages without toilets. A psychiatric expert reported observing an inmate who had been held in such a cage for nearly 24 hours, standing in a pool of his own urine, unresponsive and nearly catatonic. Prison officials explained they had no place to put him.' (You can view more photos of these suicide cages and other abominations of the California prison system [here](#).)

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James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the Village Voice and Mother Jones, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for The New Republic and Ramparts, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He

was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, *Blood in the Face*. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in *The Guardian*, *The Nation*, and *Mother Jones*, and is co-editor of the book *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets [@solitarywatch](#).

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September 29, 2022

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This type of protection would drive me to want to commit suicide! How in heavens name do they call this humane or therapeutic in any way?

P.O. Box 11374
Washington, DC 20008

info@solitarywatch.org

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