

ACT remand centres put rights at risk; Inspection raises concerns

By Victor Violante Legal Affairs Reporter

473 words

1 November 2008

[Canberra Times](#)

7

English

(c) 2008 The Canberra Times

The human rights of detainees in Canberra's overcrowded remand centres will be impinged on if conditions worsen, ACT Human Rights Commissioner Helen Watchirs warned yesterday. Dr Watchirs, who spent several hours inspecting Belconnen and Symonston remand centres yesterday, will meet Attorney-General Simon Corbell on Monday to voice her concerns and make recommendations. "I think if it gets any worse, we will definitely be heading towards inhumane treatment," Dr Watchirs said, after talking to detainees and ACT Corrective Services staff. "I'm just concerned that some solution is come to so that if more prisoners come we won't be in a worse situation than we are currently." The remand centres are well over capacity because for several weeks NSW Corrections has refused to accept sentenced ACT prisoners. The refusal is because of their own overcrowding problems.

While the ACT's new jail, the Alexander Maconochie Centre, was supposed to start receiving the first of 200 inmates this week, it will not be ready until at least early January because of delays with the installation of the electronic security system. The delay could create headaches for the ACT Government. Changes to the Human Rights Act that will come into effect on January 1, 2009, will make it possible for detainees to sue the Government in the ACT Supreme Court for impinging on their human rights. The new law requires that "public authorities" including remand centre staff "not act in a way that is incompatible with a human right". The Act also says accused people must be kept separate from sentenced prisoners. There are currently 25 sentenced prisoners at the remand centres, along with about 90 unsentenced detainees. Dr Watchirs' inspection yesterday confirmed many of the reports she had heard since the commission's damning audit report last year. "[The conditions] are pretty bad they're certainly worse than when we did the audit," she said. At Belconnen detainees are sleeping in fold-out beds in the recreation room, and up to four detainees are regularly being crammed into two-person cells. ACT Women and Prisons Group spokeswoman Deb Wybron said the conditions went against the new jail's rehabilitative goals. ACT Corrective Services officers told Dr Watchirs female detainees were not being transported between Symonston and Belconnen every weekend to make room for periodic detention detainees. This practice had ceased more than a year ago, contrary to complaints Dr Watchirs had heard. Also, detainees were receiving medical treatment, albeit delayed because of the increased demand. Dr Watchirs said she would recommend to Mr Corbell that Quamby Youth Detention Centre, which will be vacated in December when its replacement, Bimberi Justice Centre opens, be used to ease congestion among adult detainees if conditions did not improve.