

Crowded jails prepare for Tamil migrants

BY AMY STEELE, THE TIMES
AUGUST 13, 2010

The union for correctional officers is expressing concern about the possibility of Tamil migrants being housed at already overcrowded prisons in Maple Ridge.

A ship carrying migrants from Sri Lanka, The MV Sun Sea, had been spotted west of Ucluelet Thursday morning, according to the Victoria Times Colonist. John Leeburn, executive director to the chief administrative officer at the District of Maple Ridge, said wardens at Fraser Regional Correctional Centre and Alouette Correctional Centre for Women have been told to prepare for around 100 male and 80 female migrants.

Dean Purdy, chairman of the Corrections and Sheriffs Services unit of the B.C. Government Employees Union, said he's heard varying numbers about how many migrants could be arriving.

"The issue around additional boats and additional numbers is concerning for us because we've heard anywhere in the ball park of an additional 500 on top of (The MV Sun Sea) boat so that is concerning because the nine jails in B.C. are currently running at just below 200 per cent above capacity. We are more than full," said Purdy. "The Fraser Regional Correctional Centre was built to house 254 men and now houses up to 550. Increasing the jails with an additional 200 or 300 (inmates) can turn an already pressure cooker situation into turmoil."

Purdy said the union is concerned that staffing levels won't be increased despite potentially hundreds of migrants being housed in Maple Ridge prisons.

"That is a concern for us. Our concern is not only for the correctional officers that have to work in such onerous conditions but also for the communities with prisons," he said.

Purdy said the union would like to see the government come up with an "alternative solution."

"Have another facility or another institution maybe that's closed in the past," he said.

Purdy pointed to an assault on a male correctional officer at Fraser Regional Correctional Centre on Tuesday as an example of the challenges prison guards face in overcrowded jails.

"There was a pretty serious staff assault on Tuesday night," said Purdy. "A male correctional officer was attacked by an inmate and was taken to the ground and ultimately suffered a broken wrist and some bruising to his shoulder... The violence levels have risen significantly and this latest assault shows just how dangerous our job is."

Jess Gunnarson, spokesperson for B.C. Corrections Branch, said he couldn't confirm where the migrants would be housed "for both privacy and security reasons."

"I think it's important to keep in mind at this point that it's still somewhat premature. We don't have confirmation of the boats arriving," said Gunnarson on Thursday morning. "A number of the operational decisions we need to make as a branch really can't be made until it's confirmed as far as the numbers of people who are arriving, the demographics of those folks and their backgrounds so with that context we're quite confident that once the time arrives we'll be able to ramp up our operations to be at a point where we can address that need. We have a longstanding agreement with our federal partners to meet that demand and we're confident that we'll be able to do so once and if the time arrives."

Leeburn said the District of Maple Ridge trusts that B.C. Corrections Branch will be able to effectively handle the situation.

"They run prisons up there 365 days of the year so we'll leave the prisons to them," he said. "There's a good relationship between the prison and ourselves so if there were any concerns from the prison staff about their ability to manage I assume they would share those with us and they haven't ... We have no information on their capacity, how they're going to house them. We have to trust that they know what they're doing and they'll do it safely."