

Guard worries about refugees



A portable sits on the side of the road waiting to be delivered to the Fraser Regional Correctional Centre Wednesday morning in preparation for the Sri Lankan refugees that are expected to arrive in British Columbia.

Colleen Flanagan/ The News

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While two already crowded Maple Ridge prisons are preparing to house up to 200 Tamil asylum seekers, the union that represents prison guards in B.C. is worrying the influx will endanger its employees – and the refugees.

A Thai cargo ship, the MV Sun Sea, was expected to dock in Victoria this week, and the Sri Lankan passengers onboard were to be moved to the Fraser Regional Correctional Centre and the Alouette Correctional Centre for Women, for two to four months of processing.

“The government’s acknowledged that the B.C. jails are overcrowded, including the two in Maple Ridge, and operating at close to 200 per cent above capacity,” said Dean Purdy.

Purdy is chair of the corrections and sheriffs services component of the B.C. Government and Service Employees’ Union.

“Our concern is not only for the corrections officers that have to work in these conditions, but also for the communities with prisons.

“Increasing a jail with an additional 200 or 300 inmates can turn an already pressure-cooker situation into turmoil,” he said.

Corrections B.C. wouldn’t comment on the prison’s capacity but only said by e-mail that there is a \$185-million capital plan for prison expansion across B.C.

It said that 14 projects totalling \$17.3 million are underway at Fraser Regional and Alouette, which should be complete in 2011. A new 104-cell secure wing at Alouette women’s prison should be done by next year.

The province has already added 150 beds in portable buildings in Maple Ridge and Kamloops, and 24 permanent beds at Alouette.

There are currently 457 inmates in custody at Fraser Regional and 117 at Alouette.

But Corrections wouldn't give the actual capacity of each prison.

However, Purdy said Fraser Regional was built to house 254 people, and there is now just one prison guard for every 40 inmates.

"To add an additional two or three hundred is going to increase the stress and agitation levels within the jails," he said, adding that it would not be unrealistic to have the refugees processed at the Vancouver Island Correctional Centre and eventually moved to Maple Ridge.

Wardens from the two prisons told the District of Maple Ridge last week they were preparing for 100 men and 80 women.

But the Canadian Tamil Congress, a non-profit organization that represents Tamil Canadians, is expecting children as well.

"We do know that there are families on board," said congress spokesperson Manjula Selvarajah. That makes this situation different from a case in October, when a boatload of 76 male Sri Lankan asylum seekers arrived in Maple Ridge. They were taken into custody onboard the Ocean Lady ship and housed at Fraser Regional. B.C. Corrections, which operates nine correctional centres in the province, is typically responsible for adults and not kids.

"If there is children onboard they could possibly be placed into youth detention centres somewhere in the province or social services," said Purdy.

Meanwhile, Vancouver-based immigrant and refugee rights group No One Is Illegal is worried about the health and safety of the Tamil refugees if they are housed in overcrowded facilities.

Spokesperson Harsha Walia has been in contact with Tamil men detained at Fraser Regional in October who described "incredibly overcrowded conditions." "Some expressed that they were treated with intimidation, they were taunted, that they were denied access to legal aid, they weren't told what the process was," Walia said.

"None of them understood why they were incarcerated."

Walia said passengers aboard the MV Sun Sea have likely come from refugee camps and have had an arduous journey. She said there have been unconfirmed reports of at least one death onboard.

"To end up in a place where you're seeking safety and end up incarcerated is definitely an overall health concern in terms of mental and physical well being," she said. She hopes the refugees will be released immediately.

"These are migrants who have a right to asylum. There's nothing new about people being forced on boats around the world, and being forced to migrate due to displacement as a result of war and human rights violations."