

More cash for jails too little, too late

EXCLUSIVE JESSICA PAGE

Funding for an extra 320 beds at the medium-security Acacia Prison has been labelled too little, too late to stop the release of hardened criminals before Christmas due to overcrowding.

Prison authorities confirmed more than 90 inmates have been released early, after The West Australian revealed a clause in the Prisons Act 1981 has been enacted to discharge low-risk inmates to make room.

In a statement, the Justice Department said about 15 cases a month could be eligible and that existing criteria was being "strengthened" as part of a continuing review.

"The practice has been available for decades and in the past 12 months more than 90 people were released under the Act," a department spokeswoman said.

"Many of these cases were low security or Section 95 prisoners who already worked out in the community as part of their rehabilitation."

The WA Prison Officers Union has warned there is a growing risk of a riot this summer and says the Cook Government knew how bad it was getting.

"We knew 12 months ago . . . now all of a sudden they go 'oh my god we should have built that'," WAPOU secretary Andy Smith said. "We're 900 short at the moment. And when its up around 40 degrees and three to a cell, it's 60 degrees in there and they are brick cells."

"When prison officers go in the following morning, they go unlock the cells they have three

angry prisoners inside . . . It's only a matter of time before it kicks off."

Opposition Leader Basil Zempilas has accused the Cook Government of putting "froth and bubbles" projects ahead of the basics, after it was revealed that prisoners within 30 days of the end of the sentence could be freed early.

"Dealing with the safety of West Australians, women, elderly, children is the unglamorous part of governing," he said.

"Froth and bubble elements of governing are Italian soccer matches and racetracks and the like . . . now we learn about the prisoners who are being released early. So I would say to the Government, worry about Italian soccer matches when you have the basics under control."

On Sunday, Treasurer Rita Saffioti refused to say whether Cabinet's expenditure review committee had blocked funding requests to build a new prison as she defended the Government's priorities.

"You can't deliver everything overnight," she said.

"Each Budget, each mid-year review, there will be tens of billions of dollars of requests. They may be in a forward asset investment program. I can't tell you exactly what's been in and out of all the requests. (There is) over \$300 million in this mid-year review for expanded capacity in our correctional facilities."

Corrective Services Minister Paul Papalia issued a media statement announcing \$181 million had been locked in to deliver 320 new beds at Acacia Prison.