

Giant tents for prison inmates draw criticism

Wednesday, April 16, 2008 |

CBC News



Futuristic giant tents are being set up next to the Fraser Regional Correction Centre in Maple Ridge, B.C. (CBC)



Former inmate Glen Flett says double-bunking is common practice in single-person cells in most prisons in B.C. (CBC)

The B.C. government is facing criticism over its decision to house inmates in futuristic-looking giant tents next to prisons in Kamloops and Maple Ridge as a temporary solution to overcrowding.

Solicitor General John van Dongen said Tuesday the structures are secure and sophisticated, with air conditioning and heating systems.

"They have remote control automatic doors," he said. "They have surveillance cameras. And I want to emphasize these will only be [used for] low-risk offenders.

The structures will house about 150 inmates while new permanent buildings go up, van Dongen said. There are 1,557 jail cells in all of the province's correction centres, but on average they have to accommodate 2,545 inmates, government figures show. On any given day, the jails operate at 170 per cent of their capacity.

Glenn Flett, a former inmate, said putting a large number of inmates in large tents is not the way to solve overcrowding.

"I don't see how it's going to solve the bigger problem of overcrowding. It's going to be all those people in one small area," said Flett, who had spent 23 years in prison on a variety of charges.

"There's all kinds of cells being utilized for double-bunking," he said. "There's two [people] in one cell that's created for one person ... it's in the federal and provincial systems."

Opposition justice critic Mike Farnworth said it's the Liberal

government's poor planning that has led to this problem.

"You close prisons, you've reduced capacity," the New Democratic Party MLA said.

"It's [also] failed policies around dealing with people who are mentally ill, for example," Farnworth said. "A large number of people in the pre-trial facilities really shouldn't be there."

Van Dongen said the government is investing in the prison system and the tents are not permanent.

"We have a \$185 million capital budget approved over the next four years to expand our permanent facilities," he said.

"These interim structures are temporary."