



## **Media Release 7 January 2009**

### **Failure to evacuate prisoners after bomb threat 'a throwback to slavery', community organisations say**

Community organisations across Victoria have strongly condemned yesterday's failure to evacuate people imprisoned in the Melbourne Custody Centre (MCC), after a bomb threat was made against the Melbourne Magistrates Court.

200 people were evacuated from the Court for two hours but those imprisoned at the MCC, a temporary holding facility beneath the Court for prisoners on remand, awaiting court appearances or in transition between prisons, were kept locked up. The MCC is run by private contractors GEO Group Australia, on behalf of Victoria Police.

Phoebe Barton, Project Worker for the Centre for the Human Rights of Imprisoned People (CHRIP), says that leaving imprisoned people to face a potential explosion not only breached occupational health and safety laws but was a serious violation of human rights.

'Clearly the bomb threat was serious enough to evacuate everyone else. Both the MCC and Victoria Police are obliged to comply with the Victorian human rights Charter, which requires people deprived of liberty to be treated with humanity, and protects all Victorians from inhuman treatment.'

CHRIP, the Federation of Community Legal Centres (Vic) and Flat Out said that it was due to good luck rather than good management that no prisoner was physically injured or killed. 'This could have resulted in a full-scale human rights tragedy reminiscent of the days of slave ships, when sometimes due to storms, fire or piracy, crews would abandon ships, leaving the slaves to drown in chains below decks,' said Ms Barton.

The MCC has been repeatedly criticised, with a 2006 Victorian Ombudsman Report describing it as suffering from 'serious design and operational shortcomings' (p 49). In 2007 the Ombudsman found a culture of excessive force being used by staff, inadequate training, and breaches of human rights including the violent mistreatment of imprisoned people, with one of the incidents being captured by CCTV cameras.

'At the very least, the law requires that GEO and Victorian Police be held accountable for their decision-making and that their actions be publicly scrutinised' says Ms Barton. CHRIP is considering taking a complaint to the Ombudsman if the matter cannot be resolved with MCC and the Victorian Police.

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