

Chain-gangs violate UN rules, say human rights groups

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Alberta's plan to bring in chain-gangs violates United Nations rules for the treatment of prisoners, say civil liberties spokespeople.

As well, the plan may discriminate against aboriginal people, who make up a disproportionate number of Alberta prison inmates, they say.

Justice Minister Brian Evans said Tuesday he is ready to launch a one-year pilot project that would see about 20 provincial inmates charged with assault and other violent offences work shackled on roadside clean-up crews.

Provincial inmates serve sentences of less than two years.

The project has been approved by a government committee, but needs to pass cabinet and caucus, which could happen within a month.

The prisoners would be shackled at the ankle with lightweight chains. They would work on highways away from populated areas.

Shirish Chotalia, an Edmonton human rights lawyer, said Thursday the plan raises human rights concerns.

It violates the principals of human rights laws and international covenants that

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Canada has signed, she said.

"I think it's a regressive move for a country like Canada that has long been held out in the international community as a model for the protection of human rights."

Sending someone to jail is meant to punish them, but it's also seen as an opportunity for rehabilitating the prisoner while protecting the public, she said.

Displaying provincial inmates on roadside chain-gangs will do nothing to rehabilitate them and may expose people to further risks, she said.

Tony Hall, a native American studies professor at the University of Lethbridge and spokesperson for the Southern Alberta Council on Public Affairs, denounced the project.

He says the government is willing to embrace extremist options for political gain, and wonders if the average Albertan really wants to project an image to the outside world that smacks of racism and mean-spiritedness.

The people in North American prisons tend to be visible minorities, so there is

racist symbolism surrounding chain-gangs, not to mention their close association with slavery, Hall said.

"I think this will to shackle prisoners is part of a very radical extremist element in the government," he said. "I think it's going to expose Alberta's right-wing agenda in a negative light."

Mel Buffalo, president of the Indian Association of Alberta, is concerned that a majority of prisoners on chain-gangs will be native.

Almost 80 per cent of the people in the Fort Saskatchewan Correctional Centre are aboriginal, he said.

"This is not a way to deal humanely with our people. I think what bothers me the most is why the government didn't ask us what we think."

John Tackaberry, spokesperson for the Canadian chapter of Amnesty International, said the group doesn't usually comment on policies within its own country. But it called the return of chain-gangs at the Limestone Correctional Facility in Huntsville, Ala. last May "cruel, inhuman and degrading."