

Alberta

Backlog slows rights complaints

DIANA COULTER
Provincial Affairs Writer

Edmonton

The Alberta Human Rights Commission has informed an Edmonton man that it can't investigate his discrimination complaint now because it is too overworked.

In a May 4 letter to Guy Gagnon, a commission official cites "heavy staff loads, staff changes and a large backlog" as the reason for the delay.

"It is with regret that I have to inform you that there would be a delay in proceeding with your complaint," the letter says.

Chief commissioner Jack O'Neill said Tuesday similar letters notifying others of delays have been issued by his staff in the past few months.

"As long as we can't tackle the backlog, we can't have people thinking that we're going to be able to respond quickly if we can't, so we're just being honest with them."

"It's not a very good state of affairs, I agree, and it certainly

doesn't please us, but we're doing our best to cope with it."

Manuel da Costa, commission director, said the current backlog of about 250 cases means complainants can now expect to wait at least five months.

Former commissioner Shirish Chotalia worries the delays are a sign the commission's days are numbered.

"I'm concerned because this seems to reflect the larger desire of the government to impair the working of the human rights commission."

She noted several MLAs have called in the past year for the commission's demise.

Abolishing the body would "be politically incorrect, so the other option is to do what appears to be happening here and that is preventing the appropriate allocation of resources and in effect stifling its mandate, so it's no longer an effective vehicle for resolving discrimination in Alberta."

An Edmonton lawyer, Chotalia is representing Gagnon, a rig worker

who says he was the target of beatings, insults and death threats at a drilling site last year because of his French ancestry.

Chotalia said if complainants are forced to wait too long, respondents can argue the case is too old and witnesses no longer available.

O'Neill acknowledged this is a problem "because we have to treat these people justly, and that means with a certain speed, and we're not able to do it because we just don't have the manpower."

"I don't believe we're being starved out, and as a matter of fact, I think we're one of the few bodies that didn't have a budget decrease this year."

Commission staff numbers haven't kept pace with the increasing number of inquiries and complaint investigations, O'Neill said. Some employees have recently taken early retirement packages.

Community Development Minister Gary Mar, who is responsible for the commission, said he believes the human rights body's resources are adequate.