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Fears Mount for Indigenous Man's Health After Nearly 800 Days in Solitary at SA Prison

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Robert Barnes, an Indigenous prisoner, has endured nearly 800 days in solitary confinement at Yatala Labour Prison in South Australia, raising alarms about his mental and physical health. This article examines the dire conditions, systemic failures in prison oversight, and the Albanese government's lack of action on addressing inhumane treatment in custody.

Robert Barnes, serving an 11-year sentence for assaulting a corrections officer, has been confined in the high-security G Division at Yatala Labour Prison, Adelaide, for over two years. Solitary confinement, defined by the United Nations (UN) as isolation for 22 hours or more daily without meaningful human contact, becomes torture when prolonged beyond 15 days, per the Nelson Mandela Rules. Barnes' nearly 800-day ordeal, reported by The Guardian on July 18, 2025, has led to multiple self-harm attempts, including chewing off his finger, according to Croakey Health Media. Ngarrindjeri elder Major "Moogy" Sumner told ABC News, "He's suffering mentally and physically," warning that without change, Barnes risks becoming another death in custody.

Advocates face barriers in supporting Barnes. Former Aboriginal Liaison Officer (ALO) Melanie Turner resigned after being banned from G Division for advocating access for Sumner, per ABC News. Sumner, a member of South Australia's First Nations Voice, was allegedly denied visits for raising concerns, highlighting a lack of transparency. Greens Senator Barbara Pocock, in a July 16, 2025, letter to Acting Premier Susan Close, demanded an investigation into whether UN rules were breached, per Mirage News. The Department for Correctional Services (DCS) claims it provides cultural and mental health support but refuses to comment on individual cases, fueling distrust.

The Albanese government's inaction on prison reform, despite Australia's obligations under the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT), exacerbates the crisis. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners, 37% of the prison population despite being 3.2% of Australians, face disproportionate harm, per the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Labor's failure to address systemic issues risks

further tragedies, demanding urgent reform to end prolonged solitary confinement and ensure humane treatment.