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Protest Targets Palmerston Watch House Overcrowding Crisis

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— Categories: Human Rights



A protest is scheduled for August 8, 2025, outside the Palmerston Watch House in the Northern Territory (NT), south of Darwin. The demonstration will address concerns about overcrowding and the treatment of youth detainees in NT detention facilities.

Reports indicate that police watch houses across the NT, including in Palmerston, Tennant Creek, Alice Springs, and Katherine, have been accommodating detainees due to limited capacity in correctional centres. According to data obtained under Freedom of Information laws, there were 19 recorded cases of youth self-harm in these watch houses over a six-month period, with the youngest involved being 13 years old.

Some facilities have reportedly held up to 17 detainees in a single cell. These groups have included both adults and children, including Aboriginal youths as young as 11. Accounts provided to media outlets have described limited access to showers, restricted sanitary supplies, and a lack of privacy for toilet use.

The Northern Territory Police Association (NTPA) has expressed concern about the conditions, warning that the current situation places pressure on both staff and detainees. NTPA president Nathan Finn stated that the capacity issues have reached a critical stage and pose risks to officer safety, detainee welfare, and facility operations.

NT Opposition Leader Selena Uiibo has called for Labor Members of Parliament to inspect the Palmerston Watch House, citing safety concerns for officers and detainees. She noted that requests for such inspections have not yet been fulfilled.

Northern Territory Chief Minister and Police Minister Lia Finocchiaro has maintained that watch houses are safe facilities, stating that they operate under strict oversight. She said that measures are in place to manage detainees appropriately within the available resources.

NT Corrections Commissioner Matthew Varley has acknowledged that the facilities are under pressure due to prison overcrowding. He stated that the government is working to expand correctional capacity to reduce reliance on police watch houses for long-term detention.

The upcoming protest is being organised by community groups and legal advocates who seek changes to current detention practices. Their stated objectives include reducing overcrowding, improving conditions for youth detainees, and ensuring access to adequate medical care and hygiene facilities.

The Palmerston Watch House and similar facilities are designed for short-term holding before court appearances or transfers to correctional centres. Prolonged stays in these facilities have become more common due to capacity shortages in the prison system.