

# The FOUNDATION

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## LEADER

### Ample warning from the jailhouse

IT TOOK THE collapse of a building and a concrete canopy, killing several people, to get the Administration moving on legislation and other measures on Hong Kong's dilapidated buildings which threaten both residents and passers-by.

Similarly, it took the deaths of six people in Hung Hom and the gunning down of several others elsewhere, including police officers, for the Administration to get cracking on the tough anti-Triad measures it had been talking about for several years.

It also needed a second fatal gas mix-up in hospitals to jolt the bureaucracy into closer scrutiny of safety procedures in the production of gas.

There are other examples of bureaucratic inertia being suddenly disrupted: smuggling, the importation of contaminated vegetables from China, pollution.

The justification may have been that if one wants to operate on the principles of laissez-faire, then people should be allowed to do their own thing. This is, of course, a fallacious argument when its comtes to problems like creaky old buildings and fierce Triad shootouts. These

threaten the safety of innocent people and there can never be any valid reason for allowing people to do their own thing.

Similarly, there is no excuse whatsoever for further delays in relieving over-crowding in our prisons. For months now, the Correctional Services Department officials have been saying that prison discipline is near breaking point, with over-crowding being compounded by a shortage of staff.

The CSD people are no longer mincing words. "We are getting near to the point where the strain is too much for everyone," says outgoing Commissioner Chan Wa-shek. His deputy has said that a murder a day in prison or Vietnamese camp cannot be ruled out if the over-crowding is not quickly relieved.

The commissioner has been at this work for 39 years, rising from the rank of warder. No one can speak with greater authority. He is also backed up by statistics.

Lai Chi Kok prison is 80 percent over capacity; sometimes even 100 percent over. Pik Uk, built for 500 prisoners, now houses 800. Altogether there are 12,876

prisoners crammed into jails meant for 7,000. There's a 43 percent over-crowding in detention centres. Added to these are another 29,000 Vietnamese boat people under the charge of the department's 7,200 men. The policy of jailing its accounts for much of the over-crowding.

There's over-crowding. There's a gross shortage of staff. Inevitably, there's low morale. Powder keg is the only way to describe this appalling situation.

The pressure can be relieved by a review of the policy to jail such its. A more imaginative approach should be considered.

Building new prisons or enlarging existing ones should be speeded up. Inaction in this area cannot be justified when so much effort and money is being spent on housing the Vietnamese boat people. Construction work should begin as soon as possible, before work on the new airport takes up all the available manpower.

These measures are likely to lift morale of the department's personnel. Other issues like better pay and working conditions can then be tackled.

The alternative may be another tragedy.

### Making headway with China

IT IS HEARTENING to note that at last the issue of Sino-Hong Kong relations is heading towards the right track of encouraging more direct communication, as opposed to the traditional reliance on Britain to speak on behalf of Hong Kong.

leaders, as they watch the Senior Executive Councillor pledge allegiance to the British Queen, rather than Hong Kong.

But beyond the behavior of individual members is something more fundamentally important: The collective

### Regional experts for Foundation's elections seminar