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# \$7m call for more judges

By LINDA CHOY

ANOTHER six judges are being sought to reduce the waiting time and workload of the courts.

In a submission to the Legislative Council yesterday, the authorities said the shortage of judges meant courts were failing to meet target waiting times and were relying heavily on part-time judges.

Under the proposal, the High Court, District Court and magistrates' courts will each get two new judges at an estimated cost of \$7.68 million in the current financial year.

The proposal, to be examined next week, was tabled amid reports of difficulties in filling vacancies after retirements.

Government statistics show the number of cases

filed with the High Court increased from 16,950 in 1992 to 21,755 last year.

Magistracies received a total of 627,549 cases in 1994, a 17 per cent increase compared with the 538,237 cases received in 1992.

Only the District Court recorded a drop in the number of cases - from 49,740 in 1992 to 37,670 in 1994.

Cases were becoming more difficult and time-consuming, the submission said.

The situation would deteriorate because of increasingly sophisticated crimes, particularly commercial crime, and the increasing use of judicial reviews into the decisions of government departments.

The Government has said the introduction of deputy judges was of limited help in cutting the workload.

The scheme was introduced in June 1994. So far, 13 barristers have sat as deputy district judges, each for about one month.

"Deputies need longer time to settle in and it is sometimes difficult to assign to the deputy judges/temporary magistrates cases with estimated length of trial that matches their appointment periods.

"With these constraints, we cannot always fully utilise their working capacity," it said.

The growing complexity of cases is reflected by the hearing days of the longest criminal cases. In the High Court, the trial period doubled from 1993's 412 days to last year's 905 days.

The District Court cases increased 40 per cent from 551 in 1993 to 768 last year.

The judiciary wants a

shorter waiting time for cases in the High Court and District Court.

The waiting time for criminal and civil cases in the District Court will be cut from 238 days in 1994 to 150 days and from 280 days to 120 days respectively.

On average, criminal cases at the High Court will have to wait 120 days from indictment to hearing, down from last year's 160 days.

● Legislators are to be asked to approve another \$2.3 million for the Finance Branch to cope with the increase workload from the change of sovereignty.

About \$1.25 million will pay for a new Deputy Secretary for the Treasury to share the workload of the existing two deputies and deal with transition-related matters such as briefings to China.