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16 inmates left on hunger strike

ONLY 16 inmates at Tai Lam Correctional Institution were fasting last night as support for their hunger strike dwindled through the day.

The strike began on Monday evening when a group of 200 prisoners refused food to protest against recent cuts in recreation time and difficult working conditions.

By Tuesday their number rose to 450 but hunger strikers dropped off quickly yesterday.

"The situation at the camp is calm and only 16 inmates are still refusing food," Correctional Services spokesman Gordon Tam said last night.

"We are offering them counselling and hope that they will resume eating before long," he said.

Recreation time at the prison was recently reduced from one hour a day to 45 minutes because of overcrowding.

Tai Lam was built for 590 prisoners. Before the hunger strike it held 664.

Another spokesman for the Correctional Services said Lai Chi Kok reception centre and Stanley Prison were more overcrowded as they were 166 and 127 per cent beyond capacity respectively.

"We try to juggle around prisoners to spread the over-crowding problem but it's unlikely to improve until the planned new medium security prison is built.

"The Government has approved the funds but we still haven't bought the site yet."

Its capacity had yet to be decided, he said.

Meanwhile, the spokesman said illegal immigrants from China were the main factor contributing to overcrowding.

Thirty per cent of the inmates in the territory's 20 prisons are estimated to be Chinese illegal immigrants who will be repatriated on completion of their sentences.