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## **MLA: Poor kicked out of their homes for 2010 Games**

By WENDY COX

VANCOUVER (CP) - The city's desperately poor are getting kicked out of their homes in the lead-up to the 2010 Winter Olympics and the United Nations needs to monitor the situation because local governments aren't, says an Opposition politician.

NDP MLA Jenny Kwan has sent a letter to Louise Arbour, the UN's high commissioner for human rights, asking her office to act as watchdog. Kwan argues in her letter that the closure of single room occupancy hotels and the loss of hundreds of rooms is an international human rights issue.

The right to basic housing is mentioned in international human rights covenants, she wrote.

"I am very concerned that the prospect of revitalization triggered by hosting the Olympics is causing property values to skyrocket which, in turn, is displacing some of the most vulnerable people in our society," Kwan wrote in her letter to Arbour.

The city argues they are actively working on an effort to ensure many of Kwan's concerns are met.

An international expert on the Olympics and housing says it's not a stretch for some international oversight body to get involved in the issue, though he questions whether the United Nations is the right one.

Single room occupancy hotels are the last housing resort for many of Vancouver's poor. The often-squalid accommodations include a sink and sometimes a hot plate for cooking. Washroom facilities are shared.

Housing activists have demanded the city put a moratorium on the closures of such hotels.

Kwan said the poverty-stricken Downtown Eastside has lost over 700 units of low-income housing since the Games were awarded to the city.

The city and provincial governments as well as the Vancouver Organizing Committee for the Olympic Games have signed an agreement making a commitment, among other things: to "protect rental-housing stock, . . . ensure people are not made homeless. . . (and) ensure residents are not involuntarily displaced, evicted or face unreasonable increases in rent due to the Winter Games."

But Kwan argued they aren't living up to their agreement and the UN must step in.

"The 2010 Winter Olympics were supposed to be sustainable and not be implicated in the displacement of long-term residents," she said.

"Unfortunately, the worst fears are coming true due to the inaction of government and inadequate public policy planning."

However, city planner Celine Mauboules said Vancouver and other governments are actively looking at ways to ensure people aren't left on the street.

She said the city is considering 25 recommendations made last month in a report on the housing issue by a roundtable of experts including representatives from housing groups, the homebuilders association and the apartment owners association.

The recommendations include building more low-income housing and measures that would make it much more difficult to sell or demolish a single room occupancy hotel.

"We do monitor the SROs," she said.

Kwan's suggestion that the UN monitor the situation is "interesting," she said, declining to elaborate.

Mauboules also said the city does a survey of housing in the downtown core that looks at changes in the low-income housing stock and the latest issue is out in the spring.

A spokesman with the Vancouver Olympic Organizing Committee declined to comment on Kwan's letter.

Rich Coleman, provincial minister responsible for housing, was unavailable for comment, as was Colin Hansen, the minister responsible for the Olympics.

Kris Olds is a geography professor at the University of Wisconsin who has studied the impact of the Olympic Games on cities. He's also a former Vancouver city planner.

His studies found about 740 people were displaced from two apartment complexes in Calgary leading up to the 1988 Winter Games.

He also found there were up to 850 people evicted from their homes during Expo 86 in Vancouver and between 1984 - when the city was granted Expo - and 1986, 600 low-income housing units were permanently lost.

He said monitoring such situations should be done by several organizations, "not just some UN agency which is overstretched inevitably.

"It's probably useful for the UN to know what's going on, but the more appropriate organizations are the local governments."

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