

'Prison no place for children'

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Fr Mark Montebello (centre) and other activists from Mid-Dlam Għad-Dawl and Moviment Graffiti outside the law courts in Valletta, where they held a protest against putting children in prison. Photo: Matthew Mirabelli.

Prison is no place for children and the new trend of incarcerating people as young as 12 and 13 was "shameful", Mid-Dlam Għad-Dawl (MDD) director Fr Mark Montebello said yesterday.

Fr Montebello was outside the law courts in Valletta, together with other MDD members and representatives from Moviment Graffiti, to protest the recent incarceration of a 13-year-old girl and 12-year-old boy.

"Shame on any court that imprisons children," read one of the printed sheets carried by the handful of protestors.

"We are not saying these children are angels but throwing them in jail does not solve the problem..."

"The problem is solved by tackling it at the roots," Fr Montebello said, adding that Malta lacked an institution that offered therapeutic care to such young people.

He illustrated how last month, a 13-year-old girl was jailed - sentenced to seven days in detention for assaulting three girls and slightly injuring one - while two weeks ago, a 12-year-old boy was remanded in custody after being arraigned under arrest.

The boy faced 11 charges that included theft, the illegal possession of a knife and holding a boy his age against his will to extort money.

He was initially to be detained at the Yours (Young Offenders Unit Rehabilitation Services) section but, due to his young age, he was kept in a nearby cell - just like the 13-year-old girl.

So as not to be detained in this cell that was used for solitary confinement, the boy was moved to Mount Carmel Hospital where he was being looked after by the staff.

He was not kept with other inmates. The girl also had been moved to Mount Carmel where she served her detention period.

Fr Montebello stressed that Maltese law and the Convention on the Rights of the Children did not rule out the incarceration of children. But both the convention and the UN Rules for the Protection of Juveniles laid down that imprisonment should be "a measure of last resort and for the shortest appropriate period of time".

Moviment Graffiti added that more focus should be placed on developing policies that safeguarded the rights and dignity of children and young people.

Fr Montebello called on police officers and magistrates to stop this "new trend". He also called on the Children's Commissioner to offer immediate solutions to this problem and on politicians not to ignore this "pitiful situation".

This point was also addressed in the MDD Annual Report 2007 which was launched yesterday.

According to the report, the MDD last year worked on 315 cases - 172 involving Maltese inmates and 133 foreigners - during which it incurred €3,000 (Lm1,300) in expenses when it did not get any money from structural funds.

The introduction of the parole system had been MDD's greatest lobby last year and, so far, it had succeeded in obtaining pledges from the major political parties to enact a relevant law.

Over the past month, MDD met with representatives from the Nationalist Party, the Labour Party and Alternattiva Demokratika.