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State government should follow UN body's call and suspend public housing demolitions

An investigation by the United Nations' Special Rapporteur on adequate housing has laid bare how the Victorian government's demolition of public housing towers could worsen the state's housing unaffordability crisis.

The UN Special Rapporteur, Koldo Casla, has urged the suspension of the demolition program and relocation of residents in response to concerns that it may be in breach of international human rights obligations.

The results of an inquiry by the Special Rapporteur's office along with the Australian government's response were made public on Thursday evening AEST.

The inquiry was triggered by an urgent communication late in 2025 by the Castan Centre Human Rights Clinic at Monash University and Inner Melbourne Community Legal on behalf of residents of the first three towers to be demolished in North Melbourne and Flemington.

The plan to redevelop all 44 public housing towers in Melbourne was announced in 2023 and is subject to a High Court appeal by IMCL that will be heard in October.

The UN has found potential violations of the right to adequate housing as enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, to which Australia is a signatory. It also raised concerns over a lack of meaningful participation, consultation and transparency about the relocation of residents whose homes are to be demolished.

It found that the measures appear to constitute forced evictions within the meaning of international human rights law – that is, “removing people from their homes without appropriate legal or other protection”.

The Special Rapporteur, Koldo Casla, wrote:

“I am concerned that affected residents have primarily been treated as occupants of public property rather than as rights-holders entitled to participate in decisions fundamentally affecting their homes and communities.”

In his official communication with the Australian government, Mr Kasla has raised serious concerns about the mass displacement of 10,000 people in the context of a severe shortage of affordable housing in Victoria.

He noted that in December last year, there were about 82,000 people on public housing waiting lists in Victoria, with waiting periods extending for several years.¹

Public housing stocks remained largely unchanged in Victoria in the face of growing demand and community housing has only partly been able to compensate for the lack of affordable housing.

This has taken place in the context of soaring rental costs which have outpaced wage growth and pushed private rentals out of the reach of a growing number of households.²

Comments attributable to Louisa Bassini, Managing Lawyer, IMCL:

“The United Nations has exposed the folly of demolishing public housing in the middle of an acute housing crisis which for renters has no end in sight.”³

“We applaud the Special Rapporteur’s recommendation for the state government to suspend the demolition program until there is proper consideration of the human rights implications and compliance with our obligations to provide people with adequate housing.

“The Special Rapporteur has confirmed what public housing residents have been saying for almost three years: that they should be meaningfully consulted about plans for their homes before they are enacted, that they must be provided with adequate relocation arrangements, and they must have an enforceable right to return to their homes after the redevelopment.

“The demolition program has torn communities apart and separated residents from support networks and services near their homes.

“As the Special Rapporteur himself says the right to adequate housing is more than a roof over your head; it includes security, affordability, habitability, accessibility, location and cultural adequacy.

“Next month the High Court will hear an appeal against the demolition of the first three public housing towers in North Melbourne and Flemington. This has been a long road for renters to seek justice.

¹ “With around 30,000 persons experiencing homelessness, and 80,000 persons on waiting lists for public housing in Victoria, Australia and the Victoria State Government are already failing to ensure the satisfaction of the enjoyment of essential levels of the right to adequate housing to a significant number of persons in their territory in violation of the right to adequate housing. This serious shortcoming requires urgent attention, given that Australia is a developed high-income country and cannot claim to lack the required financial resources or technical capacities to ensure that everyone can access suitable housing that meets elementary standards of privacy, adequacy and security.” (p. 5)

² “For the last several decades, Australia has faced a sustained housing unaffordability crisis. In the State of Victoria, 90% of tenants rent through private rental providers and rents have risen far more rapidly than wages over the past few years. This situation has led to difficulties in accessing housing and widespread tenant debt. Many renters- in particular households with limited income- are paying more than 30% of their earnings on housing. This has occurred alongside a steady decrease in the availability of public and social housing.” (p. 1)

³ “While the renovation may increase overall housing capacity in the long term, these benefits are not expected to materialize for several decades, and the immediate relocation risk [sic] exacerbating the already critical situation of the housing system.” (p. 3)

“Victoria’s public housing waiting lists are growing because more and more people are struggling to afford a private rental property.

“But the supply of public housing is not increasing at the same pace as demand and community housing is a poor substitute. For a government to then begin demolishing the homes of 10,000 public housing residents is a policy failure of epic proportions.

“The government says its redevelopment program will eventually increase social housing on the sites by 10 per cent, but as the UN points out that is decades away from being realised. In the meantime, the relocation of thousands of people risks worsening an already critical situation. It will also come at a loss of nearly all public housing on the estates.

“This rushed and poorly designed redevelopment and relocation program is costing Victorians money and will result in a loss of state assets. Victorians living in or waiting for public housing deserve better.”

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