

## Straw to magistrates: Avoid prison terms

*by UPI*

LONDON - British Justice Secretary Jack Straw is urging magistrates to consider non-custodial sentencing alternatives Thursday to relieve overcrowding in prisons. In an interview with The Guardian, Straw said the number of inmates has been rising even more quickly than predicted and is 300 above the number projected for the end of March. As of Wednesday, English and Welsh prisons held 81,680 inmates, with 326 more held in police or court cells -- a record, and just 21 short of the system's official capacity. Magistrates have been sending more men to prison for short terms for minor crimes, Straw said, and more released convicts are being returned to prison for violating release terms. Straw announced one relief measure Thursday, sending foreign inmates back to their native countries nine months before the end of their sentences instead of 4 ½ months before. Magistrates should try to avoid prison sentences for minor crimes because alternative punishments are usually more effective, Straw said.

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