

No columbarium deals, group says

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A concern group has urged the government not to make any deals with suspected illegal columbarium operators and instead take action on their land and planning breaches.

The group made the call in response to the Lands Department's announcement that it was ready to consider allowing some operators to formalise their use of properties for columbariums on a case by case basis.

There are at least 12 such facilities across the city and two major operators have said they were in talks with the government on a possible solution - including land lease modifications or premium payments.

It also emerged yesterday that the Buildings Department has issued a demolition order to the owner of a suspected columbarium being built in Lo Wai Village, Tsuen Wan, after the structure was deemed to be in violation of building rules.

But a resident of the village said the construction work, which began early this year, had continued - even after the order was issued at the end of last month.

A spokeswoman for the Buildings Department said the owner risked a maximum fine of HK\$200,000 and one month in jail if prosecuted and convicted of carrying out illegal building work.

The concern group, comprising villagers affected by the facilities, has written to the Lands Department chief, Annie Tam Kam-lan, appealing for land lease rules to be enforced rather than negotiating with operators

who have broken the law.

"If these columbarium operators have so flagrantly ignored the provisions of the government lease and established town planning procedures, then we do not see why the Lands Department should agree to enter into negotiations aimed at permitting columbarium use that is in clear violation of the government lease and town planning regulations," the group said in the letter.

"We demand that the Lands Department strictly enforce the terms of the government lease and, if necessary, use its ultimate weapon of last resort - reclaim the land."

The group said it would be an alarming move if the government allowed lease modifications that permitted columbariums on sites restricted to other uses such as aged-care homes or residential use.

If no columbarium is included in the zoning plan, the department should reject any request to modify the lease, the group said.

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