

Gov. Cuomo, Mayor de Blasio Clash on Rikers Island Closing Timetable; Governor's office says 10-year plan is too slow and mayor's office replies that state should fix its own 'embattled' prisons and courts

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FULL TEXT

Gov. Andrew Cuomo and Mayor Bill de Blasio tussled Thursday over when to close Rikers Island, a day after 29 alleged gang members were indicted on a charge of attacks on inmates and officers at the jail complex.

Mr. Cuomo's counsel, Alphonso David, in a statement to news media on the indictments, said Mr. de Blasio's 10-year plan for closing Rikers is "tantamount to saying we have no real plan to close it," aligning with critics to Mr. de Blasio's left who have ratcheted up pressure for a quicker closure.

Mr. David expressed concerns that future mayors and city councils could cancel the plan to close the corrections complex altogether. "Gov. Cuomo, for example, isn't 10 years later implementing Gov. Spitzer's plans," he said.

Mr. de Blasio's office shot back with a heated statement of his own saying Mr. Cuomo oversees a state prison system—which doesn't run Rikers—"marred by abuse," and a court system that indicts too many individuals.

"As attorney general, Andrew Cuomo was silent on Rikers Island," said Eric Phillips, Mr. de Blasio's press secretary.

"His new-found concern is welcome, but unless the governor is willing to reform his own embattled state prison system and court system, it is impossible to see his outburst as anything but political theater."

The war of words highlights how closing Rikers has moved to the fore as a political issue for New York's Democratic officials.

The indictments Wednesday against the 29 current and former inmates for brutal beatings of inmates and officers led to new rounds of questions about the facility.

Mr. de Blasio at the start of his term put anti-violence measures in place to stem problems at the jail but faced pressure from city council members and criminal-justice activists to close it. In March, he agreed to do so on a 10-year timetable that also requires the jail population to be cut nearly in half. But he has faced growing calls to speed up the plan or adopt another put forth by Jonathan Lippman, the former Chief Judge of the New York of Appeals.

Mr. Cuomo has joined the chorus of criminal-justice advocates who want quicker action from the mayor, his longtime political rival, but he hasn't put forth plans for how the state might help speed it along. The issue is expected to arise when the legislative session begins again in January.

Conservatives have expressed concerns about closing the facility at all. Assemblywoman Nicole Malliotakis, the Republican running against Mr. de Blasio for mayor this year, has said the jail should become more humane but be kept open because the alternative, smaller jails in New York City neighborhoods, could be dangerous.

Criminal-justice advocate Glenn Martin said Thursday that while he is glad politicians are now fighting over how quickly to close Rikers, Messrs. de Blasio and Cuomo should do more than that. "They both have the power to move this forward and should be doing it in collaboration," he said.

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