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With thousands to be freed, minister's extraordinary claim...

LOOTERS 'COULD RUN AMOK' IF WE DON'T RELEASE PRISONERS

URGENT action must be taken to tackle the prison crisis to avoid looters 'running amok', the Justice Secretary has warned.

Shabana Mahmood confirmed that a sweeping new prisoner-

By **David Barrett**
Home Affairs Editor

release scheme will start within weeks in a bid to avoid the justice system grinding to a halt.

She admitted yesterday that letting convicted offenders back on to the streets carried 'a risk' but insisted

she had been left with 'no choice'. The new programme will allow thousands of criminals out of jail, including some violent offenders.

Criminals serving any length of prison sentence will be eligible for release after serving 40 per cent of their term, rather than the current 50 per cent. Sex offenders and serious violent

offenders handed more than four years' imprisonment will be excluded.

In an extraordinary speech, Ms Mahmood warned of a 'total breakdown of law and order' if the jails reached maximum capacity.

'The police would have to stop carrying out arrests,' she said. 'With officers

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