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## **Australia: Prime Minister's disregard of human rights obligations shocks Amnesty International**

In an ironic coincidence, the United Nations Secretary General's praise for Australia's assistance to East Timor today contrasts with the Australian Prime Minister's refusal to accept that universal human rights standards equally apply to his own country, Amnesty International said.

"If all states which signed up to human rights treaties took the same view as Prime Minister John Howard, then we might as well tear them up," Amnesty International said.

"The Prime Minister's blunt rejection of Australia's accountability to the rest of the world over its human rights record is a flagrant violation of the principle that state parties to human rights treaties are accountable to each other," the organization added.

Prime Minister Howard's repeated dismissal of Australian violations of international standards reveals a shocking disregard of his country's obligations. His government has persistently refused to act on laws and practices which UN bodies found inconsistent with Australia's human rights obligations.

The recent death of a 15-year-old Aboriginal boy serving a mandatory detention term highlights the punitive and racist effects of juvenile justice laws. The legislation prevents a court from considering restitution to victims and the harm created when sentencing property offenders.

An average of 75 per cent of children detained in Australia's Northern Territory are Aboriginal, although they make up only about 32 per cent of the juvenile population. A government member of Parliament has asserted that the laws target "Aboriginal lawlessness".

"It is not up to the Prime Minister to decide when the universal human rights standards that were applied recently in East Timor should be applied to his own country. If Australia voluntarily binds itself to international treaties, it must accept being held accountable to them," the organization concluded.

### **Background**

Australia rejected criticism of its juvenile justice laws by the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child in 1997, of its mandatory detention of asylum seekers by the UN Human Rights Committee in 1997, and of its racially discriminatory Aboriginal land use laws by the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 1999.

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