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Australia: government's dismissal of UN criticism undermines hard-earned credibility in human rights diplomacy

The Australian government's inappropriate attitude to United Nations criticism on its "racially discriminatory" practices puts at stake the credibility of Australia's human rights diplomacy, Amnesty International said today.

"How can Australia play a credible role in responding to UN efforts on human rights protection in Indonesia, East Timor or elsewhere, if it fails to consider seriously the findings of the UN's oldest and most experienced specialist committee on human rights?"

The Australian government has refused to take any action in response to yesterday's decision by the UN Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination to keep Australia on its urgent action agenda. The committee recommended a review of Australian laws on Aboriginal land rights and moves to abolish all specialist Australian Human Rights Commissioners.

While Amnesty International takes no position on the UN committee's findings on "Australia's racially discriminatory land [rights] practices", the organization is concerned about the government's reported claim that the findings 'discredit' the UN human rights committee system.

"Like any other government, Prime Minister John Howard's administration must accept the scrutiny of its human rights record by UN mechanisms which were established and promoted through decades of commendable Australian diplomacy."

"The sweeping dismissal of the committee's findings is regrettably in line with the government's previous negative responses to UN recommendations on Australia's human rights practices. This dangerous trend risks undermining international efforts to allow specialist UN human rights scrutiny in Australia's Asian neighbourhood."

The government reaction to the Geneva findings -- describing them as '*an insult to Australia*' -- could damage Australia's hard-earned reputation on the international human rights stage.

"Yesterday's findings should lead to a careful examination of all the committee's past and present comments on race discrimination in Australia, and on the national Human Rights Commission," Amnesty International said.

“Legislation currently before parliament to restructure Australia’s national Human Rights Commission and abolish specialist commissioners should be urgently reconsidered -- as recommended by the UN committee.”

Background

The committee’s decision of 18 March 1999 -- made under its early warning procedures -- calls on the Australian government “to address as a matter of utmost urgency” the committee’s concerns about “proposed changes to the overall structure” of Australia’s Human Rights Commission, and about specific provisions under the newly-amended Native Title Act 1993 “that discriminate against indigenous title-holders”.

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