

AI INDEX: ASA 12/10/96

4 JULY 1996 -- FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

AUSTRALIA: 100th ABORIGINAL DEATH IN CUSTODY -- AUSTRALIA'S DAY OF SHAME

Today saw the 100th Aboriginal death in custody since 1989, Amnesty International said today as it condemned the Australian government's failure to take swift and effective measures to stop indigenous custodial deaths.

Michael Anthony Blackman, a 26-year-old remand prisoner charged with assault, was found hanging from a bed sheet in a prison hospital ward of the Lotus Glen Correctional Centre near Mareeba in northern Queensland. His death followed less than 24 hours after that of another 27-year-old Aboriginal found hanging in Bathurst Correctional Centre in New South Wales.

"Michael Blackman's tragic death marks a day of shame in Australia's history," Amnesty International said. "But every one of these 100 deaths is an appalling indictment of the Australian Federal and State Governments' record of abysmal failure to tackle Aboriginal deaths in custody."

"Twenty-two Aborigines died in detention in 1995 -- the highest annual number since records started being kept in 1980. How many more people have to die before the government realises that something needs to be done about it?"

This week's deaths bring to 100 the number of Aboriginal deaths in custody recorded by independent community associations since 31 May 1989 -- the end of a nine-year period investigated by a Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. They represent overwhelming evidence that the implementation of recommendations made by the Royal Commission in 1991 is not achieving the intended results, the human rights organization said.

Amnesty International called upon the Australian Federal Government to coordinate a national review of the deaths in custody crisis and to put pressure on State Governments to work effectively against discriminatory levels of Aboriginal incarceration and deaths in custody.

"Four years ago Federal and State Governments promised urgent action to reduce disproportionate levels of Aboriginal contact with the criminal justice system -- the main cause of high indigenous deaths in custody rates. Instead, the number of Aboriginal prison deaths have reached a new record high," the organization said.

ENDS/