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NEWS RELEASE

Australia: Government silence on “stolen children”

“The legacy of horrific treatment of Aboriginal children will continue to be a stain on Australia’s image until the government stops evading its responsibility to adequately respond to the “stolen children” inquiry,” Amnesty International said today.

The national human rights commission’s inquiry details the Australian authorities’ policy of taking tens of thousands of Aboriginal children away from their families between the 1920s and 1970, and placing most of them into care, where many were sexually and physically abused.

The tragic legacy has been a cycle of detentions of “stolen children” and their offspring and systemic discrimination against Aboriginal people. Yet, despite this, the government’s response is inadequate, sidesteps responsibility and proper reparation, and fails to address fundamental human rights issues, according to Amnesty International.

“Nowhere in its response to the report does the government even mention the words “human rights”, or address the allegations of genocide, the racially discriminatory policies involved in separation, or the evidence that the authorities often failed to investigate complaints of ill-treatment,” the organization said in a report.

The vast majority of the 300,000 Aboriginal people now living in Australia come from families which experienced the removal of children, in some cases over several generations. According to the human rights commission, their treatment can be linked to the continuing high rates of imprisonment and deaths in custody of young Aborigines. As well, more than one third of Aborigines taken from their parents as children have had their own children removed and placed in care, police custody or juvenile detention.

Although the Australian government’s acceptance of its “obligation to address the consequences” of the child removal policies is welcome, as are welfare and family reunion packages, Amnesty International believes the response is inadequate as it fails to offer adequate explanations for, or comment on, important human rights issues raised in the inquiry.

The government’s statement fails to accept the “wrongs of the past” as human rights violations and falls short of international basic principles on the right to reparation for victims. In particular, the government does not accept the right of victims to financial compensation outlined in international treaties which Australia has signed.

“The government should now issue a proper, detailed response to the inquiry, answering questions about whether the child removal practice constituted genocide; what reparations victims and their families are entitled to for other human rights violations; and which measures are being taken to address the effects of separation under the current criminal justice and welfare systems,” Amnesty International said.

“Prime Minister Howard should also issue a formal apology for the actions of previous administrations. While other countries around the world are increasingly offering apologies and financial compensation to the victims of past human rights violations, the Australian government’s response to the “stolen children” smacks of disinterest and tight-fistedness.”

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