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Australia: Government must end state-sponsored racially discriminatory measures

Slamming decades of failure by Australian governments to address the dire living conditions, disempowerment and discrimination faced by many of the country's Indigenous peoples, Amnesty International's Secretary General Irene Khan warned that the government of Prime Minister Rudd must not squander its unique opportunity to right these historic wrongs.

In the latest in a long line of indignities, some 45,000 Aboriginal people are today still subject to state-sponsored racially discriminatory measures, including blanket quarantining of social security payments as a result of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER).

"The blunt force of the Intervention's heavy handed 'one size fits all' approach cannot deliver the desired results. The Government will not secure the long term protection of women and children unless there is an integrated human rights solution that empower peoples and engages them to take responsibility for the solutions," Irene Khan said.

Welcoming the commitment she had received from Indigenous Affairs Minister Jenny Macklin that the Government would introduce legislation to reinstate the Racial Discrimination Act in the Northern Territory, Irene Khan called on the Government to ensure that it does so in line with Australia's international obligations not to discriminate against Indigenous peoples.

While noting that grave levels of violence against women and children is the stated rationale for the NTER, Irene Khan emphasized that respect for women and children's human rights would not be secured without respect for all human rights for all.

"Indigenous people in remote Aboriginal communities deserve the same respect, safety and protection as does any Australian – but this will not be achieved in a sustained manner under the Emergency Response which is stigmatizing and disempowering an already marginalized people and which is in violation of Australia's international obligations," said Irene Khan.

As part of her visit to Australia, Amnesty International's Secretary General visited the Utopia region in central Australia, an impoverished grouping of homeland communities 350 kilometres northeast of Alice Springs.

"For a country which by human development standards is the third most developed in the world and one which has emerged from the global financial crisis comparatively unscathed, such a level of poverty, is inexcusable, unexpected and unacceptable," said Irene Khan.

“In the heart of this first world I found scenes more reminiscent of the third world. That Indigenous peoples experience human rights violations on a continent of such privilege is not merely disheartening, it is morally outrageous. The moral imperative to eradicate such poverty is no less an imperative on government than to eliminate torture.”

Irene Khan called for a new approach, grounded in a genuine respect for traditional culture and with human rights principles at its core, to tackle the complex problem of the entrenched poverty and discrimination faced by Indigenous peoples in Australia.

“There is a real risk of an enormous opportunity for change being squandered. The government’s apology to the Stolen Generations and other Indigenous Australians along with its support for the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is a welcome shift from the past. This Government is making a serious financial and political investment but to achieve the returns it wants, it must replace its blunt and blanket policy approaches.”

“The pathway out of poverty for Indigenous people must have the hallmarks of respect for human rights: voice must matter, equality cannot be compromised, security must be delivered on a human scale and active engagement for long term solutions must be made local, personal and perennial.”

Amnesty International called on the whole of the government, not just individual Ministries, to develop an integrated approach – an approach that places all human rights – not merely some human rights - at the centre and which allows all human rights to be respected and exercised by Indigenous Australians.

“To fulfil its enormous potential on the regional and global stage, the Rudd Government must make ‘bringing human rights home’ its central goal,” concluded Irene Khan.

NOTE TO EDITORS

In 2007, the Australian Government launched an intervention into Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. To enact the Northern Territory Emergency Response legislation and to implement the intervention, the Government suspended the Racial Discrimination Act and Northern Territory anti-discrimination legislation. Two years into a new government, more than 45,000 Aboriginal people are still subject to racially discriminatory measures, including the compulsory and blanket quarantining of social security payments in 73 Northern Territory communities.

Irene Khan is leading an Amnesty International visit to Australia between 15 and 20 November 2009. While in Australia, Irene Khan launched her book, *The Unheard Truth: Poverty and Human Rights*, which addresses these issues in depth.

More information about the book *The Unheard Truth: Poverty and Human Rights* is available at www.theunheardtruth.org

Amnesty International’s Demand Dignity campaign aims to end the human rights violations that drive and deepen global poverty. The campaign is mobilizing people all over the world to demand that governments, corporations and others who have power, listen to the voices of those living in poverty and recognize and protect their rights.

Photographs and footage of Irene Khan’s Utopia Homeland visit are available. To obtain them, and for further information or to arrange an interview, please contact the Amnesty International Press Office on +44 207 413 55 66