

Australia: Protests against Howard's takeover of Aboriginal communities

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Indigenous people and supporters are participating in protests around Australia this week, highlighting the deepening hostility and resistance to the Howard government's police-military takeover of Aboriginal townships and land in the Northern Territory. The Labor opposition is also coming under growing criticism for backing the operation and giving credence to the government's pretence that its aim is to stem child abuse.

On Monday, the start of National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee (NAIDOC) Week was marked in the central Australian town of Alice Springs with an angry march denouncing the federal intervention. Banners were carried through the town mall describing the plan as a grab for Aboriginal land.

Lhere Arthepe Native Title Holders chief executive officer Kenny Laughton told the rally: "It's about taking away more rights and making more rules so government can keep us under control, and keep us poor." Owen Cole from the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association called on Labor and its federal leader, Kevin Rudd, to "show some gumption, instead of being led by the ears by Johnny Howard".

Demonstrations are planned this weekend in Canberra, Sydney, Brisbane, Melbourne and Perth, as well as in New Zealand. Announcing the protests, Hilary Tyler from Alice Action said the child sex abuse report that supposedly triggered the takeover had been ignored by Howard. Of the 97 recommendations in the "Little Children are Sacred" report, none mentioned the forced acquisition of land, she said. "People in Central Australia know problems facing Northern Territory communities will not be solved by military occupation, but by long-term funding and support for infrastructure and strong community health and education programs."

Representing indigenous people throughout the Northern Territory, the Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory this week issued a detailed report, strongly opposing the central features of the intervention and setting out more than 50 recommendations for genuinely

addressing child abuse and its "underlying causes of poverty, disadvantage and family breakdown".

It warned: "[I]f the 'emergency measures' are implemented without community consent and ownership, there is a risk that the problems (e.g., alcohol addiction) will be driven underground and that initiatives to help prevent child sexual abuse and family violence will be resisted... The resolution of wider problems such as joblessness, poor housing, and the destruction of family, culture and community cohesion is part of any effective strategy to stop child sexual abuse and violence in the communities. However, these long standing and deeply entrenched problems cannot be resolved by a set of 'emergency measures' imposed from above."

The report is another indictment of the refusal of successive federal and territory governments, both Liberal-National and Labor, to deliver even the most basic services to the most oppressed layers of Australian society. Criticising the plan to strip families of social security payments if children fail to attend school, for example, the report noted that 94 percent of Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory have no preschool, 56 percent have no secondary school and 27 percent have a primary school more than 50 kilometres away.

The report went on to condemn the imposition of compulsory medical checks for children, "especially potentially invasive checks for sexual abuse." It stated that 99 percent of the communities have no substance abuse service, 99 percent lacked a dental service, only 54 percent have state-funded primary care services and 47 percent have an Aboriginal primary health care service more than 50 km away. The report recalled that the Australian Medical Association had recently estimated that at least \$460 million was needed in extra funding for Aboriginal health services, including \$90 million in the Northern Territory. The cost of bringing health-related infrastructure (housing, water, sewerage) to an acceptable minimum standard was an estimated \$3.5 billion, including \$700 million in the Northern Territory.

On housing, the report said the Northern Territory Labor government had just cut off funding to indigenous community housing organisations and announced that all residents would be required to pay “market based rents” and sign tenancy agreements. “Given this fact, it is difficult to understand how obtaining 5-year leases over community townships and resuming Town Camp leases can be justified.” The greatest single contributing factor to child sexual abuse was overcrowding: “There is an estimated shortfall of at least 4,000 homes, which the Northern Territory government conservatively estimates would cost \$1.4 billion to provide.”

Hoping to stave off the federal takeover, the Tangentyere Council, which manages housing in camps in and around Alice Springs, announced it was increasing rents to the levels charged elsewhere by the Northern Territory Housing Department. Rents will nearly double, from 12 to 23 percent of income, punishing residents in order to fund repairs and maintenance.

Both the Northern and Central Land Councils have condemned the planned land seizures. Central Land Council director David Ross asked why the co-authors of the “Little Children are Sacred” report, Pat Anderson and Rex Wild, had been excluded from the Howard government’s “emergency response taskforce”. By contrast, its members included former Labor MP John Reeves, who wrote a report 10 years ago advocating “taking away rights from Aboriginal people, taking away the permit system, pulling apart the two major land councils in the Northern Territory and these sorts of issues”.

Northern Land Council chief executive Norman Fry declared: “Compulsory acquisition of private property without consultation is discriminatory and cannot be justified. This short-term approach ... will inevitably lead to High Court action, international complaint, and universal opposition from traditional owners and communities.”

Sensing the growing opposition, Northern Territory Chief Minister Clare Martin used NAIDOC week to criticise aspects of the federal intervention. She threatened to join legal action by the land councils against the land grab, potentially causing legal delays. At the same time, she stepped up her own government’s implementation of provisions similar to those announced by Howard. Martin banned the public consumption of alcohol in Alice Springs and declared that “our measures are in fact much stronger” than Howard’s plan for territory-wide alcohol restrictions.

Likewise, the acting Western Australian Labor Premier Eric Ripper rejected federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough’s call to extend the military operation to that state as “political theatrics”. He then asked for Australian Federal Police to be sent into remote townships and wrote to Brough

“so that we can take this matter forward”.

For his part, Labor leader Rudd continued to emphasise his bipartisan backing for the intervention, while saying he was still asking for the details. Labor’s indigenous affairs spokesperson Jenny Macklin visited a number of areas covered by the plan and said she had received valuable suggestions from residents. Macklin offered to relay the proposals to the Howard government, saying “in a bipartisan way I think it would be good if they took these initiatives and included them in what’s being done”.

The government is claiming that the operation is going ahead, without waiting for a mooted special emergency session of parliament to rubberstamp the necessary legislation. Six “business managers” have been appointed to take charge of targeted townships, with sweeping powers to effectively force residents to comply with medical checks and other government directives by threatening to cut off welfare and employment programs.

Howard and Brough tried to hose down last week’s comments by Health Minister Tony Abbott that welfare cut-offs could be used to enforce the medical checks. Abbott’s remarks inflamed fears among indigenous people, as well as doctors, that children would be subjected to traumatic procedures. Brough said sexual health checks would be required only where authorities had “legitimate evidence” of abuse. His “clarification” confirmed that forced checks will be conducted.

Meanwhile, the Australian Army’s “Operation Outreach” is gathering pace, with 100 soldiers expected to be deployed. They are visibly accompanying the squads of police and government officials arriving to take control of camps and townships. In another bid to quell concern, a Defence Department media release stated that the troops were not carrying weapons.

Whether armed or not, the military’s involvement takes to a new level the increasing presence of the army in indigenous areas. This has occurred under the so-called Army Aboriginal Community Assistance Program, initiated by the Howard government shortly after it came to office in 1996. Since then, army teams have been sent to 16 townships in central and northern Australia, including Queensland’s Palm Island.



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