

Northern Territory intervention: an on-the-spot report

Rudd Labor deepens Howard's assault on Aboriginal communities

Part 1

A WSWS reporting team
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World Socialist Web Site *journalists Susan Allan and Richard Phillips and freelance photographer John Hulme recently visited central Australia to report on the social and political impact of the federal government's Northern Territory Emergency Response or police/military intervention into Aboriginal communities. This is the first in a series of articles, interviews and video clips. Parts two, three, four, five, six and seven were posted on June 26, July 2, July 15, July 24, August 6 and August 25 respectively. Click for video interviews one, two, three and four.*

It is now 12 months since the former Howard government launched its Northern Territory “intervention”, claiming it was necessary to protect Aboriginal children from sexual abuse and other criminal behaviours caused by endemic parental neglect and alcoholism in Aboriginal communities.

The problem was so severe, according to Prime Minister John Howard and Minister for Indigenous Affairs Mal Brough, that emergency measures involving the military, federal police and a raft of anti-democratic laws, including suspension of racial discrimination legislation, were required to “save the children.”

Labor leader Kevin Rudd immediately concurred and a few weeks later federal Labor MPs unanimously voted for the intervention legislation.

The Northern Territory intervention, however, had nothing to do with overcoming child abuse, alcoholism and other social horrors, nor was it designed to. In fact, the abject poverty and associated social problems afflicting Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory had been documented in countless reports from peak health bodies and various human rights organisations, but studiously ignored by Australian governments—Liberal or Labor alike for decades.

The intervention's real purpose was to slash welfare, break up remote communities and townships and take control of Aboriginal land. Aboriginal people, moreover, were being treated as guinea pigs to trial welfare-cutting measures that would be used against other working people—indigenous and non-indigenous alike (see: “Australian government imposes military-police regime on Aborigines”).

One year on, not only is the Rudd government maintaining all the intervention's essential features, it is expanding “income management” into Western Australia and northern Queensland. [1]

This week Minister for Indigenous Affairs Jenny Macklin told the media that Labor was “seriously committed to the intervention” and pointed out that when Howard left office in November last year, 1,408 Aborigines in eight NT communities were under “income management”. Macklin boasted that the number had now expanded to 13,309 people in 52 communities, an almost ten-fold increase. These measures, she hastened to add, would soon be extended to all 73 prescribed communities.

The real agenda

The *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party opposed the NT intervention from the outset. It was clear that the breathless and sensationalised reporting of the child sexual abuse claims by every section of the media, including the government controlled Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), was being utilised to hide the real agenda lying behind it. We therefore determined to visit the NT, and as many town camps as possible, in order to provide a truthful account of what exactly was taking place, as well as a voice for ordinary Aboriginal people—a voice that is routinely suppressed in the mainstream media.

We flew into Alice Springs, the NT's second largest city, in early April 2008 and over the next nine days visited several of its 20 town camps, interviewing camp residents and holding discussions with remote community Aborigines from Yuendumu and Ali-Curung as well as social workers, health care employees and local journalists. We also visited Tennant Creek.

Tourist brochures present the Northern Territory—an area larger than Texas or the combined areas of France, Spain and Italy—as a spectacularly beautiful and pristine place, and much of it certainly is. The deep-red mountain ranges, dry river chasms and vast desert landscapes attract thousands of tourists each year to places like Alice Springs and other parts of the Territory's aptly-named Red Centre. But tourists and millions of ordinary Australians in the country's major urban centres have little idea about the harsh reality endured by over 60,000 Aboriginal people who live there.

Alice Springs lies just north of the east-west McDonnell Ranges and its town camps, which have a long and complex history, first emerged as ration stations for dispossessed Aborigines, and then as sources of cheap labour, in the late nineteenth century. The camps are located in and around the city but with the expansion of Alice Springs, they now lie on increasingly valuable real estate.

Before the intervention, the settlements accommodated approximately 2,000 people in 191 houses and 97 tin sheds. In the past year, overcrowding has worsened dramatically, with an estimated average of 15 people per house.

The unemployment rate is catastrophic—generally over 80 percent—and the few jobs that are available are through Community Development and Employment Projects (CDEP), on rock-bottom wages. According to recent figures, the average weekly income of residents is about \$165 per week.

While these statistics, and countless numbers of reports by medical

experts and social workers, provide some indication of the abject poverty that exists, nothing could really prepare us for how they translated into human terms.

Hidden Valley

The first town camp we visited was Ewyenper-Atwatye or Hidden Valley, about five kilometres east of Alice Springs, and home to more than 135 residents. Hidden Valley is in a beautiful setting, surrounded on two sides by magnificent red rock hills and desert bush, but the poverty and lack of basic facilities are truly shocking. When one sees how the camp's residents are forced to live, one wonders why child abuse and other expressions of social dysfunction are not far worse.

Our photographer, John Hulme, has worked and photographed in some of the most poverty-stricken areas in Asia. When we arrived in Hidden Valley he was taken aback by the appalling conditions and remarked that they were some of the worst he had seen. The sheer magnitude of the problems facing Aboriginal residents—the product of decades of deliberate government neglect—is heartbreaking.

And we soon discovered that Hidden Valley is not the most deprived. Nevertheless it has the same general features of all the other camps—abandoned cars that residents cannot afford to repair, discarded mattresses, empty beer cans and bits and pieces of broken and cast off household goods—and large numbers of young children with no real facilities to cater for their needs.

Some of the homes are in reasonable condition, but the housing is rudimentary at best and catastrophic at worst. By any measure, the homes here are worlds apart from the glossy images in real estate and furnishing brochures featured every week in newspapers in Sydney, Melbourne and other major cities.

The concrete and cinder block homes built in the camps during the last decade or so are solid and an obvious improvement on the humpies and other rudimentary shelters most camp dwellers lived in prior to the early 1980s. However, many of the dwellings are in serious disrepair, with broken doors or windows. Many have bare concrete floors and only a few pieces of the most rudimentary furniture.

A recent report in the *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* pointed out that only 6 percent of housing for Australian Aboriginals has adequate facilities to prepare and cook meals, and just 11 percent pass a standard assessment for electrical safety. In half the houses, it is not possible to wash a child in a tub or bath, and a functioning shower is available in only a third.

Walking around Hidden Valley it is obvious that massive amounts of money and other resources are needed to overcome this social disaster, resources that will not be forthcoming as long as current social and economic priorities remain: i.e., as long as private profit takes precedence over urgent social needs.

The entrance to Hidden Valley is dominated by a huge blue and white sign announcing that all alcohol and pornographic material is banned inside the camp and punishable with long jail sentences and fines. These signs have been erected outside all the so-called prescribed Aboriginal communities in NT, with the clear implication that every town camp resident is a serial sex-offender and/or alcoholic.

Every Aborigine we spoke to denounced these signs—angered both by their denigration of town camp residents as well as the obvious waste of resources. According to one estimate, the signs cost more than \$8,000 apiece, money that could have been used to treat alcoholism and a range of other health problems.

The first person we met was **Daryl Allen**, a former stockman who had

been injured in a motorbike accident rounding up cattle. Allen, who was confined to a wheelchair, was shy and somewhat reluctant to speak in detail about his own circumstances.

He made clear, however, that the intervention had made his life a misery, because of the difficulties he had travelling into Alice Springs each fortnight to collect his store cards and to do his shopping at the government designated retail outlets. This either involved an expensive five-kilometre taxi ride or complex transport arrangements with his relatives.

Allen was the first of many Aboriginal people we met who was confined to a wheel chair. In some cases, this is because they had no access to health care after an accident; in others it was a product of kidney disease or other acute health problems. While many disabled people live in town camps and remote communities, there is not even the most basic infrastructure such as footpaths, ramps or even sealed roads, making everyday life extremely difficult. For those who are elderly, or who don't have immediate family, it is virtually impossible to get around. We saw several older people sitting on mattresses on the ground—without even a proper chair.

May Abbott, who is in her 50s and has lived in Hidden Valley for 35 years, could only get into town with the assistance of her two daughters. Abbott is on an invalid pension and requires wheel-chair assistance whenever she leaves home.

She told us that she considered herself fortunate compared to other sick and elderly Aborigines. "One day I saw an old lady, who looked like she would be going to dialysis and she looked really sick, and yet she still had to go to Centrelink to get a store card. I often get a bit sick when I'm waiting there," she explained.

Mark Lockyer, May's 21-year-old son, explained that Tangentyere Council, the Aboriginal organisation that administers the Alice Springs camps, provides aged-care services to about 60 people but there are another 40 on a waiting list and the numbers are growing.

Disability services in Alice Springs provide no assistance to his invalidated mother, he said. "They say they can't give us the same services they give to people living in the urban areas."

Mark is a pre-school worker. In fact, he is the only male indigenous pre-school play-group worker in Alice Springs and his work is aimed at teaching health, hygiene and nutrition to both mothers and their children aged from six months to six years. Mark quietly but firmly rejected the government and media allegations of child sex abuse in Aboriginal communities. "A lot of people, especially a lot of those in town, stereotype Aboriginal people and say that we are all bad ... but child abuse happens in any society and any race. The perpetrators could be a rich person or a poor person," he said.

Asked what he thought was needed for the community, he quickly replied: "Aboriginal people need nutrition programs, health programs and alcohol rehabilitation programs, but it looks like the government has got its mind made up and it isn't really going to listen to what we have to say."

Mark's comments were clearly an understatement. The intervention was not organised on the basis of discussion or consultation with Aboriginal people themselves, because its intention was never to meet their social needs.

Self-determination

In 1977, under the banner of "self-determination", Alice Springs town

camps began to be administered by local Aborigines through the Tangentyere Council, absolving the federal and Territory governments of direct responsibility for the camps' residents.

While limited concessions were made during this period—including the right to social welfare and pensions—the so-called “Aboriginal control of Aboriginal affairs” failed to produce any real or lasting advances. Rather, it simply gave a small layer of Aboriginal people the “right” to distribute welfare and other paltry amounts of government money that could never overcome the poverty or provide real jobs.

Aboriginal town camps have never had the sort of services taken for granted in the rest of the country. Sealed roads, regular garbage collections, public transport, postal deliveries and other vital requirements of life in the twenty-first century are largely non-existent.

Services provided by organisations like the Tangentyere Council, such as limited aged- and child-care services, a children's safe house and financial advisory services, are grossly under-resourced and only exist through CDEP funding, a cheap labour program which pays workers far less than award rates.

Whitegate and “native title”

In the early 1990s the Keating Labor government insisted that “land rights” and “native title” claims by Aboriginal people would provide the framework for overcoming endemic poverty. These claims, like others before them, were a cruel political hoax. This became much clearer after we visited the Whitegate town camp on our last day in Alice Springs.

Whitegate is located about two kilometres east of the Alice Springs town centre and is home to about 50 residents. Here we spoke with several town camp residents, past and present, including 60-year-old **Myra Hayes** who denounced the so-called intervention and said it would “do nothing” for the residents.

Like many of her generation in the town camps, she was born on a central Australian cattle station where her father worked for rations. Her surname was taken from the name of the family that owned and ran the property. In those days, Aboriginal people were almost regarded as part of the live-stock by the pastoralists, and treated accordingly.

Myra settled in Whitegate about 20 years ago and in 1994 was the official applicant for a native title claim by the Arrernte people for legal recognition of the land where the camp is located. In May 2000, the claim was eventually successful, but only after almost a decade of litigation. And what did this victory bring?

Prior to their native title claim Whitegate residents lived in tin sheds and humpies—rough dwellings thrown together with whatever material could be found in the area. Eight years later nothing has changed.

Myra Hayes and other Whitegate residents are still housed in tin dwellings, where summer temperatures rise to the low 40s. They are freezing cold in the winter and have none of the most basic requirements of life that most Australians take for granted.

Whitegate does not have running water. Water must be carried by hand to the rudimentary homes. Nor does it have electricity, sewage or telephones and although there is a central ablution block, the toilets only work intermittently. There are no facilities for children—not even a playground—or any other basic services required for normal human existence.

These conditions—an everyday reality of life for Whitegate residents—exist in a community just a few minutes from Alice Springs's town centre, where art galleries and tourist shops sell Aboriginal paintings and expensive cultural trinkets at prices Aboriginal people themselves could never dream of affording.

Alice Springs News and the corporate media, of course, blame the town campers for the run-down state of their communities, arrogantly suggesting that they are responsible for their own poverty. But the plight of Aboriginal people is the end-product of decades of dispossession by mining companies, pastoralists and other corporate entities, and the refusal of consecutive governments to provide the basic necessities of life—above all good, well-paid jobs, along with properly resourced and staffed health-care and education, and decent housing.

This is apparent to anyone prepared to look beyond the hysterical media headlines and examine the real economic, social and historical background to NT's social catastrophe.

To be continued

Note:

[1] Income management compulsorily diverts 50 percent of social welfare and pensions, due to Aboriginal people who live in government “prescribed” Aboriginal communities, into store- or debit-cards issued by the state-funded welfare agency Centrelink. The government claims that “income management” assists Aboriginal family members to buy food for their children, rather than the money being spent on alcohol. But prior to the intervention, Aboriginal people could have their welfare payments quarantined on a voluntary basis through various Aboriginal community and welfare organisations—i.e., a set portion was put aside and provided in the form of food and other coupons.



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