

Seventh Session of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

24 April 2008

Indigenous Affairs in Australia

**Statement by Mr Bernie Yates
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(Check against delivery)

Madame Chair

I would like to make a brief statement addressing the issues raised yesterday by a number of speakers regarding Australia's approach to Indigenous affairs, and questions raised by a member of the Permanent Forum (Mr Hassan) and earlier by the Rapporteur (Mr Dodson).

I welcome the positive comments from several delegates and members of the Forum on the Australian Government's Apology to the Stolen Generation. And I welcome the remarks on the Government's *Statement of Intent to Close the Gap in Indigenous Health* by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders, whether from the world of business, public policy or community development, have argued strongly for evidence-based policy and greater accountability.

The Australian Government is very pleased to have established a "partnership approach based on shared ambitions and shared goals".

The Commissioner has been instrumental in developing this goals-based framework through his advocacy and Social Justice Reports.

Concerns were raised yesterday about the measures to prevent child abuse, violence and lawlessness in the Northern Territory – the Northern Territory Emergency Response. These measures were precipitated by the *Little Children are Sacred Report* which documented widespread abuse and neglect of Aboriginal children.

The response represents a massive commitment of government resources and on-the-ground effort to address the chronic problems that have led to such poor outcomes for people living in the communities and town camps of the Northern Territory.

There are some early signs of positive benefits from the emergency response:

- . with increased police presence and night patrols in many communities, people in some communities are reporting greater community safety
- . the introduction of a school nutrition program which provides breakfast and lunch to school aged children is improving child concentration and engagement in learning
- . the food security of communities is being assessed and upgraded on a region by region basis through new community stores licensing arrangements and the introduction of bush orders schemes
- . hundreds of jobs occupied by Aboriginal people have been formally recognised as Australian Government service delivery jobs for the first time, with superannuation and proper entitlements

The previous Australian Government had commenced the phasing out of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) program in the Northern Territory.

- . On 10 December 2007, the current Government announced a moratorium on this process. This will remain in place, while the Government considers reforms to CDEP.
- . However, the Government is continuing to convert CDEP positions involved in the government service delivery into regular jobs, expected to benefit some 2000 Indigenous Australians in the Northern Territory, including through 140 ranger positions.
- . This is in addition to the Government's commitment of \$90 million to train and employ an additional 300 Indigenous Ranger positions to undertake environmental services under the Working on Country program.

The new Australian Government has opened engagement with Northern Territory Aboriginal leaders in regard to the emergency response.

The Australian Government has also committed to a comprehensive expert review of the response which will be independent of Government and involve consultation with Aboriginal people. The terms of reference of the review are expected to be finalised shortly. It is anticipated that they will include consideration of racial discrimination issues and take into account the 2007 report of Australia's Social Justice Commissioner.

By directly addressing the crisis in remote communities, the response will help to restore the human rights of Indigenous children and communities and rebuild social norms and infrastructure.

The *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* continues to provide Indigenous people the power to negotiate and control mining on their land and to receive negotiated returns in addition to returns from royalties paid. There is a range of other initiatives in Australia in support or recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land rights, including other statutory land rights schemes, legislation to recognise and protect native title rights and interests in land or waters, and purchases of land on behalf of Indigenous Australians.

The Government is also undertaking detailed consultations with stakeholders on the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, recognising its importance to Indigenous peoples globally.

I want to emphasise that the Australian Government is committed, as evidenced by the National Apology on which I spoke on Monday, to a new relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples based on respect, co-operation and mutual responsibility. Our approach includes commitment to closing the gap in outcomes between Indigenous and other Australians, underpinned by targets and benchmarks.