

PRESENTATION TO THE WORKING GROUP ON INDIGENOUS POPULATION; (GENEVA) BY
HELEN BOYLE, CHAIRPERSON OF THE COMMITTEE TO DEFEND BLACK RIGHTS (AUSTRALIA)
4 AUGUST, 1987.

Madam Chairman, Members of the Working Group and friends,

My name is Helen Boyle. I am a Yamagee from Ingrada country in the state of Western Australia. I am also Chairperson and Co-founder of the Committee to Defend Black Rights. It is in this capacity that I wish to address this Working Group meeting to inform members of events that have taken place within Australia since the last meeting, two years ago.

I wish to use the example of Aboriginal/Islander deaths in police and prison custody in Australia to inform the Working Group experts of the deteriorating situation facing Aboriginal people who are being denied their basic human rights.

Many Aboriginal people are picked up on minor legal charges, taken to police cells and within hours they are dead. In the majority of these cases, the legal authorities have rushed to the claim before proper enquiries have been held, that the causes of these deaths have been suicide. Some state authorities go so far as to claim that these deaths are the result of "evil spirits"parading around in a cowboy hat".

Our Committee has currentlz 85 deaths in custodz recorded. These are figures that we have gathered ourselves from Aboriginal people throughout Australia. We have grave fears that there are many more.

Of these 85 recorded Aboriginal deaths in custodz, 31 have occurred within the last two years. In this year alone, we have recorded 15 deaths in custody throughout Australia. This averages out that every 14 days, somewhere in Australia, an Aboriginal person dies in police or prison custody this year. Some of these deaths have ocured in the same family. Some have died on the same day in different parts of the country, and many of them, have been found hanging.

If we took a comparable ratio for the non-Aboriginal people in Australia, we would find that 1500 would have been found dead in a prison cell or police lock-up this year.

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In relation to some of these deaths, there has been no government inquiry. In others long delays in holding an inquiry has meant that when it has been held, the findings have concluded that there has been insufficient evidence to establish how the deceased died, or delayed so long that a key witness had died and others were unavailable. In places such as the state of Queensland, which has the highest number of recorded deaths, it is not compulsory to hold an inquiry. This situation is totally unacceptable.

Since the last Working Group meeting, a chilling pattern is emerging in Australia. Young Aboriginals, the majority of whom are men, are being arrested, tried and executed in all one night. For many of us an arrest or goal sentence could mean a possible death sentence.

Racism in South Africa is institutionalised by law. Thousands of Blacks have died fighting those laws. In Australia, racism is also institutionalised by law. The official government imprisonment rate for Aboriginal people in Australia is 16 times the national average. In places such as Groote Eylandt in the Northern Territory it is the highest rate of imprisonment rate for a group of people throughout the world. This surely represents a systemised oppression and terror for our people.

With such alarming rates of imprisonment and escalating rates of deaths in custody, many of our people strongly believe that we are effectively in "death row".

Madam Chairperson, All human lives are sacred, and all peoples] throughout the world, have that right to life. Aboriginal people living in Australia are no different. We too, are human beings. We feel the loss of our children, our brothers, our sisters, our husbands and wives, our friends, and a member of our race. Yes, madam chairperson, we are no different. We too, love life, our freedom.

The Australian government has recognised this right to life through their efforts to seek evidence as to how one young non-Aboriginal baby died. \$26 million was spent in legal costs and a Royal Commission. Was it a dingo, was it the parents, was it other members of the same family or was it someone else? The Australian government was quite determined to find out, how this young baby died.

It has funded our Committee only \$13,000 to investigate six Aboriginal deaths in custody, while at the same time, gather further evidence of the remaining 81 cases. We are also needed to assist the Aboriginal families with their grief and the continual harrassment and intimidation that they suffer at the hands of authorities and racist groups once they speak out in public about the loss of a family member.

The Australian government must implement a federal Royal Commission in these deaths. to show that it strongly believes that Aboriginal lives are the same worth as the rest of the Australian population. The Human Rights Commission Inquirz that is proposed has been imposed and established without prior consultation with all concerned, will only result in a "white-wash" of the situation. The truth will still remain uncovered and we will continue to suffer a great loss of lives.

We point out to the International Community that these deaths of indigenous people in custody in Australia show that our rights are not respected, that racism exists with disasterous effects on our families and that we cannot trust Australia's justice system because they lack accountability for those responsible for the deaths of our people.]

In approximately 4½ months the non-Aboriginal population in Australia will be celebrating 200 years of occupation of our lands. It has now come the time for the Australian people to readdress the wrongful doings of their history. Our culture is over 60,000 years old. We can learn and teach each other, grow together and enrich all our lives. We do not want our people to be massacred any more in the "lucky country" the world calls Australia.

Thank you Madam Chair.