

Ramingining Homelands Resource Centre Aboriginal Corporation

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Committee Secretary
Senate Select Committee on Regional and
Remote Indigenous Communities
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

By e-mail: indig.sen@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir / Madam,

Re: Inquiry into the Northern Territory Emergency Response

Enclosed please find our submission for the Committee's consideration

Yours sincerely

Ken Hodges
Chief Executive Officer

Ramingining Homelands Resource Centre Aboriginal Corporation

Submission to

**Senate Select Committee on Regional and
Remote Indigenous Communities**

on

Northern Territory Emergency Response

Background

Ramingining is about 600 km east of Darwin on the edge of the heritage-listed Arafura Swamp in eastern Arnhem Land. The Community was established in the early 1970s, following the movement of a number of Yolgnu clan groups from nearby Nangalala. It became Aboriginal land with the declaration of the Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act 1976.

The Ramingining Homelands Resource Centre Aboriginal Corporation (RHCAC) is an Incorporated Aboriginal Association made up of approximately 265 members who are residents of the 10 main homelands surrounding Ramingining. It was established in 1991 to improve the welfare and promote the development of these residents.

The RHCAC arranges for the provision and maintenance of employment, housing, health, communication, and other essential services to the Homelands. Increasingly, the Corporation's activities are becoming focused on enterprise development and the promotion of economic independence.

In Ramingining there is a school, a clinic, an Arnhem Land Progress Association (ALPA) store, and the Bula Bula arts centre. These facilities are all accessed by the Homeland residents. The RHCAC also operates a small convenience store and is the outlet for retail fuel sales to the Ramingining community. The East Arnhem Shire – Ramingining office is also located in the Community.

Whilst Ramingining is accessible by road (4WD) and air, most roads to the community are closed during much of the wet season. Travel time by road to Darwin (in the 'dry') is approximately 8 hours, as it is to Nhulunbuy.

Ramingining has a sealed, all-weather airstrip, and at the present time has no direct service to either Darwin or Nhulunbuy. These services depart from, and arrive at the island of Milingimbi. To connect with these flights residents must

either travel by small private boat or by small aircraft charter from Ramingining to Milingimbi. The cost of this 10 minute Ramingining to Milingimbi flight is currently \$240 one way. The RHRCAC is negotiating with a Darwin based aviation company to establish a Regular Passenger Transport (RPT) service

There is a weekly freight barge service from Darwin to Ramingining via the Dhabila Landing located 32 kms from Ramingining over a dirt road. This service delivers all goods for the community, including dry, chilled and frozen food for the two stores, and fuel.

Introduction

At the outset we strongly contend that any measure introduced and continued by any Government of any political persuasion that requires the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act and the NT Anti Discrimination Act is fundamentally flawed.

Such is the case with the Emergency Response.

We also contend that the Emergency Response is further discriminatory as parts of the intervention affect some but not all Indigenous people living in the Northern Territory.

All Governments need to acknowledge that they have failed Aboriginal people living in remote communities of the Northern Territory by decades of chronic under funding and neglect of essential services such as health and housing. Government have used the release of the “Little Children are Sacred” report as a cover for the decades of neglect.

The NT Anti Discrimination Commission’s submission to Peter Yu’s NTER review into the Emergency Response stated:

“The government styled the intervention as an emergency, but they had known there was a problem for at least 40 years. The Territory government and the federal government have systematically underfunded remote communities.”

We agree with this assessment. Government has been well aware of these serious shortcomings for many, many years; if they have not, then they have been not only incompetent but culpable.

Living and working in a remote Aboriginal Community is not the same as living and working in a remote western dominated society country town; it is chalk and cheese. At the very least the western dominated country town was established for an economic purpose, be it pastoral, or mining; whereas a remote Aboriginal community was established because it was seen at the time as a way of allowing

Aboriginal people to live on their traditional lands while providing them with basic services. Any economic considerations were not entertained at the time.

There is a difference between the communities, and Government continues to fail to recognise or accept this fact.

Income Management

By far the arbitrary imposition of Income Management on Centrelink customers living in Ramingining and the Homelands has created the greatest anxiety. Not only is it contrary to the Racial Discrimination Act and the NT Anti-Discrimination Act, but there is a very real belief that Income Management takes away responsibility, identity and freedom.

If Income Management is to continue then it must be modified so that it complies with both Acts; **not** the Acts amended to comply with Income Management. Additionally, participation in Income Management should be either voluntary or at the very least targeted towards those Centrelink customers who are judged by Centrelink or other relevant Government Departments such as Family and Community Services to be in need of such intervention; ie, there should be 'triggers' that alert the authorities that there is a problem that needs to be addressed.

To be truly fair to all Australians, we believe that if Income Management continues, either on a mandatory or voluntary basis, it should be introduced Australia wide to all Centrelink customers, not just those who live in the 'prescribed areas' of the Northern Territory.

CDEP

The Government's recent review of CDEP and its introduction from 1 July 2009 of 'new' CDEP continues to deny the reality of the situation for CDEP in remote Aboriginal communities. As stated above, remote Aboriginal Communities and Homelands were established to allow Aboriginal people to live on their traditional lands. Any potential economic benefits were not a prime factor in this political decision, if they were considered at all.

For remote communities such as Ramingining and the Homelands, CDEP is the 'lifeblood' of the community. It is what allows services to be provided and fledgling business' to survive by subsidising labour costs. Without such subsidised labour cost it is inevitable that service levels will fall and the very people that the Emergency Response is meant to help, the children, will suffer.

The requirement for a set number of CDEP positions to be transitioned into jobs each year, while laudable is, realistically, unfeasible. There seems to be no recognition from Government of how these 'jobs' are to be funded by communities with no resources.

It must be recognised and appreciated that in remote Aboriginal communities the possibility of a large number of government / private enterprise jobs providing employment for a large number of people is a goal that, it is arguable, is unachievable, at least in the short to medium term. To do so will require a massive injection of capital from either government or private entrepreneurial investors, and the large scale employment of appropriately qualified persons to provided suitable training and mentoring to local indigenous people over the long term. Such employment will bring its own problems, such as retention and the supply of accommodation.

Aborigines living in a remote community do not want to have to, and may not be able to move away from their lands in search of work. Again it must be recognised and appreciated the significant cultural ties that bind traditional Aboriginal people to their land. Whereas in mainstream society it is accepted that job seekers will, or may have to, move locations in search of work, this is not a realistic option for Aboriginal people in remote communities. Their land is their life and their soul.

There must be a shift in Government perception away from the negative view of CDEP, to one where it is considered as a positive way of providing worthwhile employment to community members in their communities. This has not been achieved in the Government's recent review of CDEP.

We believe that part of the Government's main agenda concerning CDEP is that by transitioning CDEP participants from CDEP wages to Centrelink benefits then they can be Income Managed. There has been enough subterfuge around this subject for too long.

Housing

The Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure program (SIHIP) introduced as part of the Emergency Response, has effectively marginalized those Indigenous people who live in the Homelands rather than in the 'prescribed communities'.

These people, who suffer the same problems of overcrowding and inadequate levels of maintenance funding for their housing as those who live in the communities are not to receive any of the benefits of the SIHIP.

We believe this to be patently unjust, if not discriminatory. While they are subject to the same 'negatives' (eg Income Management, changes to CDEP) Homelands residents are not to receive one of the major positives that comes from the Emergency Response; ie, improved housing.

Additionally, while the Ramingining housing stock will eventually be brought up to an acceptable living standard, there is to be no new houses built despite ample evidence of chronic overcrowding.

Conclusion

After nearly two years since its inception, the Federal Government Emergency Response into Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory is a failure.

From the Ramingining Homelands perspective we have seen no tangible benefit to our residents; only a great deal of uncertainty and angst.

As stated at the outset, any action by Government that requires the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act and the NT Ant Discrimination Act is fundamentally flawed.

If remote Aboriginal communities had been properly and adequately funded over the preceding years there would have been no need for an "Emergency Response". As it is any 'emergency' is of the Government's making, not of Aboriginal people.

Consequently, the Government must accept responsibility for its past failures and not seek to shift blame onto Aboriginal people. It must:

- restore the Racial Discrimination and the NT Ant Discrimination Acts,
- remove the mandatory nature of Income Management,
- accept that CDEP positions are jobs that provide worthwhile, albeit subsidised, employment, and
- adequately fund on a recurrent basis essential services for Aboriginal Communities and Homelands, including housing.