

Racism in Australia to be scrutinised on the world stage

The Australian Government is bracing for another round of intense scrutiny at the United Nations – this time focusing on its efforts to combat racial discrimination. Despite being a nation committed to fairness and multiculturalism, racism is a growing problem in Australia – one that causes immense pain to racial and ethnic minority communities, and which threatens to tear our social fabric apart.

Today in Geneva, the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination will assess Australia's compliance with a key international law that Australia pledged to uphold to tackle racism.

A coalition of Australian NGOs will brief the Committee in Geneva and present a report, endorsed by 53 organisations. The report documents Australia's backward slide in the treatment of ethnic minority communities, refugees, people who seek asylum and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The Committee is likely to question Australia about its cruelty towards people seeking asylum and the dire situation on Manus Island, which the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights has called a humanitarian crisis."

Download report: [Australia's Compliance with the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination](#)

Quotes from NGO representatives

Les Malezer, Chair, FAIRA and member of the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues

"Australia will likely be strongly criticised for long-term and continuing racial discrimination against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and for not acting on the many recommendations made over past decades from UN human rights experts, treaty bodies and other nations. Since colonisation our status remains characterised by political subjugation, extensive incarceration, and segregated welfare and labour systems. We will be telling the Committee about the urgent need for human rights laws and for the Constitution to be reformed to promote equality for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and all Australians."

Rod Little, Co-Chair, National Congress of Australia's First Peoples

"10 years on from the adoption of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Australia has promised again to uphold the Declaration 'in word and deed' in taking a seat on the Human Rights Council. If it really wants to be taken seriously and do what is right, it needs to immediately work with us and stop imposing things on us."

"The Australian Government's relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has been so strained in recent years, it has affected the crisis in our communities. We've seen evidence of record disadvantage and mass reduction of services, and almost all the Closing the Gap targets have not been met in the past 10 years. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have the solutions. We've laid them out in the Redfern Statement and we'll be bringing this framework for success to the attention of the world."•

Mary Patetsos, Chairperson, Federation of Ethnic Communities Councils Australia

"Legislation and policies that balance and protect the rights and responsibilities of all Australians regardless of cultural, linguistic, racial or religious background are of vital importance."

"Australia's removal of, and attempts to restrict, pathways to citizenship are a threat to the social cohesion and harmony of Australian society, generate fear and uncertainty for migrants and their families, and counter their efforts to construct long term, stable futures."

Wayne Muir, Co-Chair, National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services

"The disproportionately high rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people forced into prison or who experience violence is a pandemic, which is tearing people away from their families and communities. We are calling for the urgent implementation of a national justice target, as part of the Closing the Gap framework, which will force governments to immediately address the root causes and consequences of the criminalisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people."•

“Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services work hard, with limited resources to provide culturally appropriate, trauma-informed support services to address underlying factors of disadvantage which have resulted in our people being forced into a school to prison pipeline. However legal services alone cannot address systemic disadvantage. Governments must take responsibility to ensure immediate investment in long-term support services.”

Hannah McGlade, Director, Aboriginal Family Law Service

“Aboriginal women experience unacceptably high rates of inter-personal violence and at the same time also face great difficulties in seeking just and preventive responses from the state due to structural and systemic discrimination. Australia should develop a specific National Action Plan to address violence against Aboriginal women to respond effectively to these issues. Violence – individual and structural – is a major barrier to the realisation of Aboriginal women’s human rights.”•

“Australia should also strengthen dialogue with Indigenous women representatives to protect the human rights of women and girls. We need to ensure gender equality is a key component of Indigenous affairs, including through special measures where necessary.”

Adrienne Walters, Director of Legal Advocacy, Human Rights Law Centre

“Australia now has a seat on the UN Human Rights Council. With this privilege comes a huge responsibility to be a leader on human rights – a responsibility that must start in our own backyard.”•

“We expect Australia to be rebuked and called on to immediately evacuate the men, women and children on Manus Island and Nauru to safety in Australia. We expect calls for Australia to take immediate steps to reduce the number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander kids being locked up and to abandon its racist ‘work for the dole’ program in remote communities. We also anticipate Australia being asked why it still lacks human rights laws to ensure equality for all Australians.”

Antoinette Braybrook, Convener, National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services Forum

“Violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women has reached epidemic levels in Australia. We need stronger national action to develop specific, culturally safe, holistic responses that are designed by our women, for our women. A dedicated national action plan for violence against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, that includes greater investment in Aboriginal family violence prevention services, would be a significant step to achieving this.”

SNAICC – National Voice for our Children

“The increasing over-representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children in child protection systems across Australia is impinging on our children and families’ entitlement to the equal enjoyment of social and cultural rights. Not nearly enough is being done to strengthen and support families so that our children’s vital connections to family, community, culture, and country are developed and maintained.”

“Australia needs to comply with its international human rights obligations. In line with the right to self-determination, our children’s rights can only truly be met through processes that are designed and led by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.”

Asher Hirsch, Senior Policy Officer, Refugee Council of Australia

“Australia’s systematic discrimination of people seeking asylum and refugees is well known to international bodies, with various arms of the UN having denounced the inhumane policies of the Australian government, particularly the mandatory detention of refugees on Nauru and Manus Island. As Australia goes before the CERD, it should reflect on its abysmal human rights record and seek to demonstrate that it can be a global leader in upholding human rights.”

Amy Frew, Lawyer, Human Rights Law Centre

“The Australian Government will face tough questioning about its ongoing cruelty to the 2000 men, women and children it has held for four and a half years in danger and limbo on remote islands in the Pacific and the humanitarian crisis currently unfolding on Manus Island.”

“We expect strong condemnation from the Committee for Australia’s cruel deterrence regime which has seen thousands of lives destroyed – families ripped apart forever, sexual assaults, violence and deaths. These are serious violations that have gone on

for far too long. We're expecting the UN to call on Australia to immediately evacuate these 2000 men, women and children from Manus and Nauru to safety in Australia, and allow those already in Australia to remain rebuilding their lives in safety."

Background to the CERD review

The international Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination is one of the first international human rights treaties. In signing up to the treaty, Australia committed to taking all steps required under the treaty to eliminate racism and to being regularly reviewed by the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination – a panel of experts on racial discrimination. Australia was last reviewed in 2010.

On the 27 and 28 November, Australia will be examined by the Committee about whether it is complying with its obligations. Before Australia is examined, the NGO delegation will have an opportunity to present the Committee with views from communities affected by racism and racial discrimination.

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