

Australia can do more to improve situation of indigenous peoples – UN expert



The Australian aboriginal flag flying in Victoria Square, Adelaide

27 August 2009 – Despite strides in improving the situation of indigenous people in Australia, an independent United Nations expert today called on the country to build on that momentum to close the gap of “indigenous disadvantage.”

James Anaya, the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights and fundamental freedoms of indigenous people, said that during his 11-day visit to Australia, which wrapped up today, he was “impressed with demonstrations of strong and vibrant indigenous cultures.”

He noted that he has been “inspired” by the strength and resilience of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to move forward despite having suffered due to racism.

Such historical forces continue to make an impact today, with disparities between indigenous and non-indigenous populations especially severe in terms of life expectancy, basic health, education, unemployment, incarceration and access to basic services, Mr. Anaya pointed out.

The Government has implemented many initiatives to improve the socio-economic conditions of indigenous people, he said, but some of its initiatives raise concerns.

Of particular concern, the expert said, is the Northern Territory Emergency Response, which authorities characterize as an “extraordinary” measure.

Under this scheme, there are community-wide bans on alcohol consumption and pornography, as well as an income management regime and an imposition on compulsory leases.

“These measures overtly discriminate against aboriginal peoples, infringe on their right of self-determination and stigmatize already stigmatized communities,” Mr. Anaya said in a **statement**.

President Kevin Rudd, in his apology to indigenous peoples last year, called for a genuine partnership between the Government and indigenous communities to move towards a future “based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility.”

Although there are several successful local indigenous schemes, in concert with the Government, “I also heard many accounts of situations in which Government

programmes fail to take into account existing local programmes, hampering their ultimate success," Mr. Anaya said, adding that there is often duplication of efforts.

The Rapporteur, who reports to the Geneva-based **UN Human Rights Council**, serves in his role in an unpaid and independent capacity.

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