

Australia pledges millions to Aborigines

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SYDNEY (AFP) - Australia announced a 155 million US dollar package for isolated Aboriginal communities on Friday, after a new report revealed shocking levels of child abuse among the downtrodden minority.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, who made a landmark apology for Australia's treatment of Aborigines last year, said the package was an attempt to redress decades of poor treatment. "It's time that we put the rancour of the past behind us," Rudd said as he signed the accord aimed at boosting health, education, housing and transport in Western Australia's vast East Kimberley region.

"It is time that we recognise the things that have not worked in the past, and it's time we actually marched together towards the future on those things that do work."

The announcement comes a day after the centre-left leader vowed "decisive action" on a government report which revealed that grim living conditions for Aborigines were worsening. Some 35 in every 1,000 children were suffering abuse or neglect, six times more than the general community, while murder rates were seven times higher. Aborigines are 13 times more likely to be imprisoned, the report found.

When Rudd delivered his historic apology last year, for abuses suffered since white settlement in 1788, he pledged to halve the gaps in infant mortality, life expectancy, literacy and school completion rates in 10 years.

But the conservative opposition party says Rudd has achieved little and called for a military and police intervention in the desert communities of the Northern Territory to be expanded into the Kimberley and other western regions.

"(Rudd) said these results are devastating and that is right... it seems that nothing has been achieved," said Julie Bishop, opposition spokeswoman for Aboriginal affairs.

"I would like to see the intervention moved into WA as well. There are some drastic circumstances for indigenous people in the north of Western Australia."

Rudd's deputy, Julia Gillard, defended the government's record and said it was always going to be a "long-term journey" to reverse years of disadvantage.

"You don't turn around decades of difference in life expectancy, education and employment outcomes overnight. That's not possible," Gillard said.

Aborigines account for 2.5 percent of the 21 million population, and are Australia's most impoverished minority, with a lifespan 17 years shorter than the national average.

Now in opposition, the conservatives long refused to apologise to Aborigines amid fears it would spark an avalanche of claims for compensation, particularly from the "stolen generations" of children who were forcibly removed from their parents.

In his apology speech Rudd described the stolen generations as a "blemished chapter" in Australia's history and vowed a future of "mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility".