

Australia Apologizes to Aborigines

Rod McGuirk in Canberra, Australia
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[Australia's](#) apology to Aborigines for decades of racist policies drew an outpouring of emotion Wednesday.

But attention quickly turned to what many consider the inevitable next step: paying compensation to victims of past injustices.

"The job's not done; it's only the beginning," said Lowitja O'Donoghue, 75, who has campaigned for almost a decade for a government apology.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has ruled out compensation, and lawyers say the apology passed by Parliament on Wednesday does not add anything to Aborigines' chances of successful legal claims.

But Aboriginal leaders say the injury can never be fully repaired until the victims receive reparations for being taken as children from Aboriginal mothers.

Stolen Generations

From 1910 until the 1970s, an estimated hundred thousand children were taken from their parents under state and federal laws based on a premise that Aborigines were dying out.

O'Donoghue, who was among a hundred members of the so-called "stolen generations" invited to witness the apology motion passed unanimously, regretted that her mother had not lived to share the experience.

"I felt very emotional; I was thinking about mother," said O'Donoghue, who was reunited with the tribal Aboriginal woman shortly before her death.

Hundreds waited for hours to enter Parliament House to hear the apology, many traveling thousands of miles from remote Outback camps to get there.

Millions more witnessed its national broadcast in living rooms throughout Australia, on giant screens erected in city parks, and on televisions in schools and workplaces.

"For the pain, suffering and hurt of these stolen generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry," Rudd said, triggering tears and applause throughout Australia.

Aboriginal leader Patrick Dodson agreed that the stolen generations deserved compensation.

"Any group of people who have been treated badly under laws ... deserve to pursue compensation judicially, legally, or politically, and they deserve our support," Dodson told the National Press Club.

Reparations

Several have attempted to sue governments for taking them from their families, but the lawsuits have achieved limited success, largely because of the difficulty of proving the cases.

The most successful case was that of Bruce Trevorrow, who this month was awarded 700,000 U.S. dollars in damages and interest from the South Australia state government for taking him from a hospital without his parents' knowledge 50 years ago.

Australia's smallest state, Tasmania, is the only government to establish a compensation fund for the stolen generations.

The state government announced last month that it has paid 84 forcibly removed children and 22 of their descendants. Each victim received 52,000 U.S. dollars and each descendant 4,500 U.S. dollars.

Aboriginal leaders including O'Donoghue expect that the official acknowledgment of past mistreatment will inspire more litigation.

But the top lawyers' association in Australia's most populous state, the Law Society of New South Wales, said the apology did not add weight to any claim for compensation.

"This apology will not lead to the floodgates opening or a rash of compensation claims," the society's president Hugh Macken said. "The legal landscape is no different to what it was yesterday or will be tomorrow."

Responsibility

Rudd's predecessor, Prime Minister John Howard, had refused to apologize for past policies, arguing that contemporary Australians should not be held responsible for mistakes of the past.

Senior members of Howard's center-right Liberal Party had argued that an apology could leave the government liable for claims of compensation.

While Rudd's apology without compensation had been criticized as a hollow gesture, the government has responded by promising to inject far more spending into improving Aborigines' standard of living.

Today, there are about 450,000 Aborigines in Australia's population of 21 million. They are the country's poorest group, with the highest rates of imprisonment, unemployment, and illiteracy. Their life expectancy is 17 years shorter than that of other Australians.

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