

Commonwealth Nations Need A Statement On Indigenous Rights

Many Commonwealth nations have a need to support the rights of the Indigenous Peoples because they are unable to assert their sovereign rights without such a guarantee. The Commonwealth has been, and remains, silent on the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

CAIP notes that many Commonwealth nations, such as the Pacific nations (excluding Australia and New Zealand), have achieved sovereign status as indigenous nations - these countries are Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu, and Vanuatu. However, despite their recognition as nation-states, these nations experience post-colonial disadvantage because their rights to exist as Indigenous Peoples are not guaranteed.

These nations are subjected to economic exploitation through mining, tourism, fishing and forest industries, and their cultural, economic and environmental rights are exploited in much the same way as other Indigenous Peoples, eg the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples (Australia), the Maori (New Zealand) and the First Nations (Canada).

They face military threats through operational nuclear warheads and nuclear testing in their regions, and they face extinction through environmental pollutions caused by the highly industrialised countries. They have rights which are Indigenous Peoples rights – the right to continue to exist with their traditional values, lifestyles and independence.

Without the guarantee of Indigenous Peoples rights these small nations are dominated by the values of western civilisation and powerful corporations, and their sovereign status is insufficient to deal with the global forces which control economies, the environment and human values. These small nations are dependent upon aid from the wealthy and powerful nations, often under political terms which keeps subtle controls over their independence.

The recent major conflicts in the Commonwealth can be attributed as much to the insufficient commitment by the Commonwealth to decolonisation, as to ambitious politicians.

The political troubles which have occurred in Zimbabwe, Bougainville, Solomon Islands and Fiji can be traced unjust possession of lands and resources, and to inappropriate political institutions inherited from the colonisers.

CAIP believes the solution lies in the recognition of Indigenous rights, which demand more sympathetic attention to addressing the injustices created and manifested by colonisation. CAIP urges the Commonwealth of Nations to prepare a statement on the rights of Indigenous Peoples, for adoption at the next CHOGM meeting in 2003.

The United Nations, the European Union and the Organisation of American States have identified Indigenous Peoples as distinct populations and have prepared documents for the promotion of Indigenous rights.

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