

Australia's Treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Under UN Microscope

Indigenous leaders say it's a critical time for the government to reimagine Australia's justice system

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The Australian government's treatment and acknowledgment of First Nations peoples will be under fire from several countries participating in a UN hearing this week.

Countries including Uruguay and Sweden have [submitted questions](#) ahead of the hearing on Wednesday on the measures being taken to reduce rates of Indigenous incarceration. And Germany has questioned why there has been a delay in [raising the age of criminal responsibility from 10 to 14 years old](#).

Despite Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders making up just 2 per cent of the national population, they constitute 27 per cent of the prison population.

The United Kingdom has also submitted questions over the government's plan to work with, and listen to, Indigenous elders and provide a national voice to Parliament for Indigenous people.

The questions are part of the UN Human Rights Council's [universal periodic review process](#) (UPR) that happens about every five years.

In a submission to the review, the Australian government said that since the last review Australia had made significant achievements in the realisation of human rights, including addressing family and domestic violence, human trafficking and modern slavery, and the legalisation of same-sex marriage.

The submission said that it welcomed the opportunity to discuss "achievements and opportunities for improvement in protecting and promoting human rights".

Indigenous leaders say taking action is critical

Priscilla Atkins, the CEO of the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency, told Pro Bono News the fact that so many UN countries had pulled this issue into focus was "embarrassing".

"Australia has failed to make any progress on these issues since the last hearing in 2015," Atkins said.

"It's a critical time for the Australian government to reimagine our justice system and urgently commit to ending the over-incarceration and death in custody of our people."

She said that it was also important that community organisations kept the pressure on following the review to ensure change was achieved.

"Change can happen. We saw it last year when the ACT committed to raising the age of criminal responsibility," she said.

The UPR working group will hand down its final recommendations to the Australian government on 22 January.

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