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14 March 2005 MEDIA RELEASE

18 organisations release Indigenous rights statement

18 groups today released an open letter calling for justice and equity for Indigenous peoples.

In the letter, initiated by ANTaR Victoria (a group working for Land Justice and Reconciliation), 18 organisations called on governments to commence the process of developing a fair and just settlement of the grievances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Spokesperson Ms Jill Webb, Chairperson of ANTaR Victoria, said "this should culminate in formal Treaties between our peoples."

The open letter is attached.

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OPEN LETTER – ANTaR Victoria – justice and equity for Indigenous peoples

For release 14 March 2006

Over the next two weeks the eyes of much of the world will be on Australia and its sporting achievements. But there is another area of endeavour where our country falls way short of comparable Commonwealth nations like Canada and New Zealand – delivering justice and equity for Indigenous people in Australia.

Australia is one of the richest countries in the world, yet Indigenous people still on average have lives that are 20 years shorter than non-Indigenous people.

Indigenous people, living in over 400 nations on this continent, who have looked after and maintained this land for more than 40,000 years, were once very wealthy. They had a rich culture, comfortable lifestyle, strong connecting beliefs, and most importantly, lots of land on which to live.

Indigenous people were dispossessed of their land, and therefore their wealth, by the arrival of non-Indigenous people and as the result of the processes of colonisation, became and remain the single most marginalised and disadvantaged group on this continent.

Unlike New Zealand and Canada, Australia has made few inroads into the appalling state of Indigenous health. Unlike both of these countries, Australia has made no treaties with the original occupants who were dispossessed of their land.

Despite the many hurdles placed in their way, Indigenous people have succeeded against the odds. A number are members of the current Australian Commonwealth Games team. Others are artists performing in cultural festivities associated with the Games. We congratulate these Indigenous athletes and artists and applaud their achievements.

But their success should not be used to gloss over the brutal reality of what most Indigenous Australians have to confront on a daily basis – racism, opportunities denied and lives tragically cut short.

At this time of national celebration and international attention, we call on the Australian and Victorian Governments to commence the process of developing a fair and just settlement of the grievances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. This should culminate in formal Treaties between our peoples.

We also call upon Governments, churches, NGOs and those in the corporate world to commit themselves to brokering genuine agreements which respect Indigenous self determination.

Only when our different histories and life circumstances are reconciled, can there be genuine unity within the Australian nation.

1. Jill Webb, Chairperson, ANTaR Victoria
2. Taimor Hazou, Deputy Chair, Australian Arabic Council
3. Sharan Burrow, President, Australian Council of Trade Unions
4. Paul Slape, National Secretary of the Australian Services Union
5. Russell Atwood, Executive President, ASU Victoria Authorities and Services Branch
6. Pauline Spencer, Executive Officer, Federation of Community Legal Centres (Victoria)
7. Tamar Hopkins, Solicitor/Law Reform/CLE worker, Flemington & Kensington Community Legal Centre
8. Cam Walker, national liaison officer, Friends of the Earth Australia
9. Rev. Harry Kerr, Convener, Pax Christi Australia (Victoria)
10. Professor Eleanor A Bourke and Dr Diane Sisely, Co-Chairs, Reconciliation Victoria.
11. Ian Wishart, National Executive Director, Plan
12. Bev Polzin, Clerk, Victoria Regional Meeting of the Religious society of Friends (Quakers)
13. Dave Kerin, Convener, Union Solidarity
14. Cath Smith, CEO, VCOSS
15. Andrew Rowe, Chief Executive Officer, Victorian Local Governance Association
16. Brian Boyd, Secretary, Victorian Trades Hall Council
17. Samiro Douglas, Manager, WIRE - Women's Information
18. Georgie Ferrari, Executive Officer, Youth Affairs Council of Victoria