

Aborigines Say Australia Pushes Their Plight to Sideline

By JANE PERLEZ

WALGETT, Australia, April 17 — Two Aboriginal teenagers, Noleen Sharpley and Elleasha Peters, are best buddies — each other's family, really — in this rough outback town where the whites live on one side, the Aborigines on the other, and the public schools are a land of violence and despair.

One of 12 children from a broken home, Elleasha, 17, is a gifted runner, a young champion in the region who was once promised a professional coach. Noleen, 15, said she liked school until it became too difficult and the teachers would not help her.

Now they are dropouts, with limited reading and writing skills. They team up for drinking parties with Aboriginal youths — "old fellas" over 18, they say — who buy the liquor and tend to start fighting when it runs out. Recently, Noleen's face was punched to a bloody mess during one of these sessions.

Their story encapsulates in miniature the abysmal status of many of Australia's indigenous people. The conservative government of Prime Minister John Howard has pushed the needs of the Aborigines to the sidelines, with few complaints from his white constituency, analysts say.

"Aborigines are effectively off the white agenda," said Hugh Mackay, a social researcher.

This week, the government announced it would abolish an elected council of Aborigines, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, which was established in the 1980's as a means of self-determination for indigenous people.

Even though the council was widely described as corrupt, the national newspaper, The Australian, said the decision would "take Aboriginal governance back 30 years."

Mr. Mackay said many Australians carried a "huge but unadmitted collective guilt" about Aborigines that was reflected in the "most appalling racist humor reserved for Aborigines."

Australians embrace successful Aborigines, he said, and some who really shine — like the Olympic gold medalist runner Cathy Freeman — are treated as national heroes. But "if Aborigines are not glamorous and successful, we don't want to know about it," he said.

The death of Thomas J. Hickey, a 17-year-old Aborigine, this year in Sydney, in circumstances that may have involved a police chase, pushed the issue of the overwhelming gap between Aborigines and the white population back to the fore.

After Thomas's death, a battle between aggrieved Aborigines and the police just a few miles from the Sydney Opera House exposed the depth of bitterness among Aborigines.

In the 1970's and 80's, successive governments made efforts to make amends to the Aborigines, but Mr. Howard rebuffed those policies.

Aborigines may have numbered as many as a million in 1788 but had dwindled to 93,333 in 1901, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. They were forced off their land after British settlers began arriving in 1788 and then brutally suppressed. The latest Australian census reports the Aboriginal population as 427,094 among a population of more than 20 million.

Government statistics and reports of private groups show the perilous situation of Aborigines. The Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs was told in 2000 by a special task force that only 20 percent of Aboriginal students met reading standards, and fewer than 30 percent met writing standards. In some parts of Australia, criminal justice groups say, Aboriginal men are 25 times as likely to go to prison as whites.

Here in Walgett, where a meat works that chops up kangaroos for export is the main chance for employment, the small-bore picture is a snapshot of the nationwide problems. The Women's Legal Services of New South Wales reports that the worst cases of family violence — with women suffering severe long-term injuries, often as a result of abuse under the influence of alcohol — are reported by Aboriginal women to their office here.

"We've got so many women coming in with problems for protection, asking for houses, that we can hardly cope," said Catherine Carney, the principal lawyer for the group.

Like Noleen Sharpley and Elleasha Peters, Thomas Hickey grew up here. His father was in and out of jail, and is now serving time for armed robbery. His mother has six other children. Thomas dropped out of school and drifted to the city.

"He couldn't read and write too good," said Thomas's grandfather, also named Thomas Hickey, who brought him up.

Parents blame the schools. Some of the parents graduated from the town's schools in the 1980's when, they said, the teachers persevered with the students. They say Thomas could have been saved if the state education authorities had cared.

His cousin, Vanessa Hickey, and another mother, Diana Tuhura, who is white, told a meeting of the town's Aboriginal elders that the primary school was a cauldron of violence in which inexperienced teachers were unable to control bullying students.

They said the health of some of the Aboriginal children was so poor that it affected their learning and communication skills. Many children suffer from "multiple middle-ear

infections," and because of their poor hearing they could not understand one another in the playground, said a speech therapist at the school.

Since Thomas's death, some parents have removed their children from the primary school to teach them at home. "I don't want my son, Tyron, to go down T. J.'s track," Ms. Hickey said. She said she was horrified to find that Tyron, 9, could not do simple subtraction. She said that when she sat him down at home and explained the process, he quickly understood.

Ms. Tuhura, who also is teaching her son Jakson, 8, at home, said she could see no future for him at the high school. She had been told, she said, that on a "good day" 10 of the high school's 107 children turned up for class.

Dennis Foley, an Aborigine from a prominent Sydney clan and a lecturer in indigenous studies at the University of Sydney, said some Aborigines believed that "white fellas want us to break down and disappear."

But he was not so pessimistic. "I think that most Australians want to see our Aboriginal societies develop," he said, adding that Aborigines themselves "want to recover."

"We want our kids to have a chance in life," he said. "Education, employment and healthy lifestyle — no more, no less than what white Australians desire."

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