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AUSTRALIA: JUVENILE ABORIGINAL DETENTION A KEY HUMAN RIGHTS CONCERN

Amnesty International welcomed the Federal Government's plans for a national conference on the over-representation of young Aboriginal Australians in custody.

"A coordinated national response on indigenous arrest and detention rates is a welcome step to address this key human rights concern in Australia," according to a letter sent today by Amnesty International to the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, Mr Robert Tickner.

"Aboriginal youths suffer most of all young Australians from the disproportionate effects the criminal justice system has on their policing, arrests and detention," the organization said.

The current debate in Australia over record high numbers of Aboriginal deaths in custody should refocus attention to the key underlying issues. In particular, public scrutiny should spotlight the high criminalization and incarceration rates, which appear to discriminate against indigenous Australians of all age groups, but especially of children and people in their 20s.

"During 1995, Aboriginal teenagers reportedly accounted for up to 60 per cent of all juvenile detainees in some states," Amnesty International said.

The risk of incarceration for Aboriginal children is currently 18.6 times that experienced by other Australian youths. Young Aborigines are much more likely to be charged initially only for minor offences such as public drunkenness that would not normally lead to detention if committed by non-Aboriginal Australians.

While Amnesty International welcomed the proposed conference, it felt the conference should not distract attention from the urgent need for action on issues affecting all Aboriginal offenders -- continuing deaths in custody and their over-representation in the criminal justice system.

"Last year was the worst year on record for Aboriginal deaths in custody," Amnesty International said.

According to Amnesty International's preliminary statistics, Aborigines last year made up only 1.3 per cent of the adult population over 14 years of age, yet accounted for almost 25 per cent of all custody-related deaths.

In 1987, when figures for deaths in custody were almost as high as the current toll, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was created. Five years ago, the Commission published 339 recommendations aimed at reducing the extremely disproportionate levels of criminalization and custodial deaths of Aboriginal Australians.

Amnesty International urges the Australian Federal and State Governments to live up to their commitments repeatedly made since 1992 to fully and consistently implement the vast majority of these recommendations and to speed up efforts to successfully reduce the rate of Aboriginal criminalization and detention.

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