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National effort needed to tackle Indigenous violence

Only a major national effort involving governments and Indigenous communities as equal partners would overcome the crisis of violence that has overtaken many Aboriginal communities, Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR) said today.

ANTaR National Director, Gary Highland said the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough was right to draw attention to the issue, call for more policing and urge the nation to face up to the reality of the situation.

“The Minister’s call is similar to what many Indigenous leaders have been saying for some time – that Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities have to face up to the reality of this situation and take urgent action to overcome it,” Mr Highland said.

Mr Highland said that Indigenous leaders from across the political spectrum including Mick Dodson, Larissa Behrendt, Warren Mundine, Sue Gordon, John Ah Kit, Tom Calma, Bonnie Robertson and Rob Welsh have frequently spoken out on this issue in the past, but their calls have been largely ignored by successive governments.

“Similarly, Indigenous communities have developed programs like Redfern’s award winning Blackout Violence to tackle the problem head on, but these have received little or no government support,” he said.

Mr Highland said it was wrong to blame factors like Aboriginal culture for violence.

“Sadly, violence and abuse against women and children crosses boundaries of race, class and geography.”

“Making cultural justifications for this kind of appalling behaviour is just a cop out. The vast majority of Aboriginal people from around the country that I have spoken to say there is no place for violence in Indigenous or any other culture,” Mr Highland said.

Mr Highland said that violence was not just a problem in Alice Springs but in communities across Australia.

“What is needed is a comprehensive national response that involves Indigenous communities in the solutions not imposes them over the top by government,” he said.

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“This response should take into account the differing circumstances of individual communities. It should focus on building the capacity of Indigenous programs that already work – not on broader ideological agendas that can potentially divert people from focusing on the solutions.”

Mr Highland said the aim should be bringing people from different backgrounds together to tackle the problem – not driving them apart.

“For this reason, the Minister’s comments on self determination were unhelpful because they could potentially divert the debate away from solutions and on to the government’s ideological agenda,” Mr Highland said.

“In fact, violence and dysfunction is often the result of the powerlessness that comes from a lack of self determination.”

Mr Highland said that any response needs to condemn the perpetrators but avoid demonizing whole communities and cultures.

“We need to acknowledge and support the often courageous and innovative efforts of Indigenous people to stamp out the problem in their communities. We also should be genuinely listening to the Indigenous people who have been tackling these issues in their communities for some time.”

Mr Highland said that any solution must also come from understanding the social and historical factors that have helped cause violent behaviour. These include the abuse that occurred to many members of the stolen generations, poverty, a lack of educational opportunities, racism and substance abuse.

“This is not to make excuses, but to understand that if we’re fair dinkum about stopping violence and abuse we need to tackle both individual behaviours and social causes,” Mr Highland said.

Mr Highland said he had the sense that Minister Brough was genuinely horrified by what he has seen since he took over the Indigenous Affairs portfolio and is sincere about doing something about it.

“If the Minister is genuine about bringing people together to solve the problem in an inclusive way that focuses on the issues not ideology, then ANTaR will support him 100 percent,” Mr Highland said.

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