

NT mothers say 'invasion' targets wrong priorities



**WORRIED:** Rachel Willika and Raymattja Marika in Adelaide during the week.  
Picture: Jo-Anna Robinson

# Don't steal our children

Lauren Novak

**MOTHERS** from remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory have told how they fear a second Stolen Generation will be created under the Howard Government's controversial intervention.

In Adelaide for public forums this week, the women also condemned the scheme as an "invasion" of their lands.

Announced in June, the Government's agenda aimed to protect abused children.

But Eileen Cummings, from Bulman, 320km south-east of Katherine, said parents were afraid their children would be taken from them in a repeat of the Assimilation Policy which lasted up to the 1970s.

"None of us believe they really want to protect our children," said Eileen, who was taken from her parents at the age of four and now has three daughters, 10 grandchildren and two great grandchildren.

"The concern is the children are going to be removed and they are going to go through the same things we did."

The new legislation restricted welfare payments, banned alcohol, relaxed the Lands permit system and strengthened policing.

It was prompted by the *Little Children Are Sacred* report - commissioned by the NT Government - which detailed graphic child abuse, poor living conditions and short life expectancy.

Rachel Willika, from Eva Valley, 100km south-east of Katherine, first heard that government officials and the army would descend on her town from a friend who warned her to "watch out".

"When I heard that, I felt really frightened," Rachel said.

"I went back and told my family, they said: 'We gotta pack our



bags, we gotta hide in the bush'." Raymattja Marika, of Nhulunbuy, about 700km east of Darwin, said the action was an "invasion of our privacy".

"One old man said (when the Government arrived): 'What's the army doing here? What's the police doing here? Is there a war going on?'" she said.

"People think they're spies." When details of the intervention first reached Nhulunbuy, a mining town of about 4000 people, Raymattja was "absolutely stunned ... shocked and angry".

The Federal Government justified the plan as necessary to protect children and help families but the women said the changes were not benefiting them at all.

Although they said child abuse was not as rife as reported in the media, problems with alcohol, drugs and violence had, in some communities, escalated.

The problems affecting almost all remote towns - and those the women felt the Government should be directing more money towards - included unsealed roads, lacking infrastructure, limited access to transport and sky-high travel and food costs.

In Eva Valley, Rachel has no access to the internet, radio, newspapers or television. There is no shop and she must take a taxi - an almost \$400 round trip - to Katherine, 100km away.

Once there, she has to pay \$4.50 for a tub of margarine, \$5 for a loaf of bread and \$3 for a can of Coke - all on the average weekly wage of about \$150. And the introduction of food vouchers under the Government's plan has added insult to injury.

"If they're fair dinkum about this government intervention, it should be made easy for your own people to live," said Raymattja, who works at Yirrkala Art Centre.

She drives to work and returns home to her three-bedroom house where she lives with nine others, including her adult children and three grandchildren.

While in Adelaide, Raymattja commented on the "lovely houses" and called for more housing in the NT that was "culturally appropriate" to larger Aboriginal families wanting to live together.

Rachel also lives in a full house with her six children and one grandson. She works as a school tutor and volunteers at the local church, where she helps patrol the streets of Eva Valley looking for alcohol smugglers. At home, she said it was "open slather for drug dealers, smugglers, pedophiles, hippies, ferals" since the permit system was lifted.

Pilawuk White, from Peppi-menarti, 320km south-west of Darwin, now lives in SA but was also concerned about the effect of lowering the barriers to outsiders.

"Who's to say the people won't go off into our land where they're not allowed to go and destroy our sites and our country?" she said.

"What we want the Australian people to know, and even people overseas, is we are resisting."

Respected South Australian indigenous leader Alice Rigney, who spoke at Friday's forum, had a warning for white Australians.

"They have to be careful, they have to be scared, too, like we are for our people," she said, referring to the Prime Minister's admission that eventually all parents mistreating their children could face welfare cutbacks.