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KEEP THE FLAME BURNING SAY INDIGENOUS CHRISTIANS

'Important candles of hope and understanding have been lit in the last 10 years', says NATSIEC (the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission), 'but much remains to be done in strengthening these flames in the hearts and lives of all our peoples.' Commenting on the continuing struggles for recognition and justice as the International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples comes to a close, Australia's peak Indigenous ecumenical body draws attention to significant achievements as well as major enduring challenges in the days ahead. 'It is encouraging to see that the Decade's theme of "partnership in action" has been taken up in many places', said Graeme Mundine, NATSIEC Executive Secretary, 'but the path ahead is still very rocky and uncertain, and it is questionable how far the will to partnership extends in many quarters.'

Amongst the achievements of the past decade, NATSIEC points to the development of education and the growth of the Reconciliation movement, highlighted symbolically by the Bridge Walks in 2000. Progress has however been slow on main key areas of concern, not least in relation to genuine land rights and self-determination, care for the land and sea, and the health-crisis and poverty of so many Indigenous Australians. Particularly shocking is the way in which, whilst health and age of mortality differentials have been narrowed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the USA, Canada and elsewhere, in Australia matters have actually worsened. Whilst welcoming recent renewed public attention to Indigenous issues, NATSIEC hopes that this will therefore be no mere smouldering fire, nor dependent on tragic events such as those associated with Palm Island at this time.

One of the greatest gains of the last ten years has been the growing international partnerships across the world between Indigenous peoples themselves. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Christians have for instance been active participants in the work of the Encounter on Racism process of the World Council of Churches and in recently developed UN bodies such as the UN Permanent Forum for Indigenous Peoples. Such partnerships have raised key issues of human rights, and strengthened the efforts of Indigenous peoples worldwide in upholding and reclaiming culture, identity, language and ancestral land, empowering the movement to establish respect for Indigenous Peoples' right to define for themselves their political, economic, cultural and spiritual development. Therefore, says Graeme Mundine, 'on this International Human Rights Day, we call on all Australians to renew the partnerships begun. May our hearts burn ever more fiercely with the gentleness of God's love and the strength of God's justice.'

Contact:

Graeme Mundine
Executive Secretary
0419 238 788