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Torres Strait to secede

Islanders warn of sanctions if bid ignored

By MICHAEL FOSTER

MORE than half of the Torres Strait islands yesterday agreed to secede from Australia.

A provisional government is expected to be in place within the next six months.

The group has also threatened to call for trade sanctions against the Australian Government if the push for self-government is ignored.

Five tribes, representing about 60 per cent of the Torres Strait islands, signed the declaration of sovereignty including the tribal elders of Mer, Erub, Ugar, Warraber and Kaurareg.

Yesterday's announcement was the culmination of a two-day conference of the Torres Strait Sovereignty Movement in Townsville.

Torres United Party chairman Jim Akee, spokesman for the five tribes, said the push for sovereignty was being funded by a private consortium.

Mr Akee refused to name members of the consortium or release financial details except to say funding involved "millions and millions of dollars".

"We won't be putting any names up until we get further down the track," he said.

"We have done the feasibility studies on the resources of the Torres Strait and our financial backers are very keen to come in by the end of this year, which is a special year for indigenous people."

Mr Akee claimed that Australia made \$140 million a year out of the shipping and prawning industries in the Torres Strait islands.

"There is about \$30 million a year going back in social services — mind you, up to 95 to 98 per cent of my people up there are unemployed," he said.

"What we are saying is that it is just not good enough.

"In all the other times that we have met to discuss sovereignty there was one ingredient missing and that was financial backing — now we have it."

Mr Akee said the provisional government would consist of representatives from the five tribes named on the declaration.

He said an electoral system incorporating traditional laws would be established.

Self-government would mean the creation of a national bank, new currency, passports and stamps — all the infrastructure of a legitimate country, Mr Akee said.

"What we are saying to the Government is 'you talk to us on equal terms'," he said.

Mr Akee said if the Australian Government ignored the push for sovereignty it could face trade sanctions.

"If the Australian Government gives us a hard time we are going to lead the fight for trade sanctions through the United Nations and our international network of people," he said.

"Similar to what Australia did to South Africa, we will lead that fight again."

Mr Akee said the remaining islands not covered by the declaration would be pushing towards self-government by 2001.

Federal Government representative on the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, Senator Margaret Reynolds, said: "Self-government for the Torres Strait was inevitable and would follow the precedent set by Australia's previous response to self-governing territories like Norfolk, and Cocos and Keeling islands."

A spokesman for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs Minister Robert Tickner said yesterday that claims for sovereignty had been rejected in the Mabo decision.

"Claims for sovereignty have also been rejected by representatives of Torres Strait Islanders in the Torres Strait islands," the spokesman said.



Kaurareg elder Adie Paul, 79, was four when he was forcibly removed from his island home Photo: SCOTT RADFORD-CHISHOLM

Elder 'robbed of his heritage' at gunpoint

ADIE Paul was four years old when he was forced at gunpoint to leave his home on Hammond Island in the Torres Strait.

Apart from a brief interlude after World War II the 79-year-old Kaurareg chief elder has never again lived on the island of his birth.

Kaurareg elder and adviser Roney Wasaga says his uncle was "forcibly removed — dispossessed of his heritage".

In 1922 the people of Hammond Island were transported 25 nautical miles down the coast to Moa Island.

The Hammond islanders did not attempt to return to their home until 1948.

When they did, they found a Catholic mission had been established.

"A Catholic priest told the people they had to be baptised in the Catholic religion or they

could not stay," Mr Wasaga said.

"The people thought that they had been rejected by who they called the intruder (the Catholic priest).

"They left and settled on neighbouring Horn Island and have remained at Horn ever since."

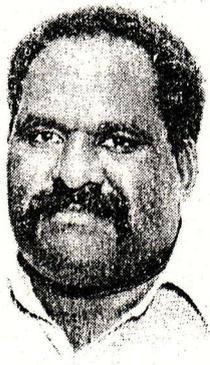
Mr Wasaga said his uncle and his family attempted to return during the ensuing

years, but "found that other islander people had settled in (on Hammond Island)".

Mr Paul remembers little about the day his family and friends were herded together and told they were leaving their island.

"We thought we were just going to have some food, some damper they told us, and then the guns came out," Mr Paul said.

"I don't remember who they were."



Jim Akee