

Indigenous people crushed by faraway administrators

By Dr William Bartlett Day

Darwin, June 22: For the past two years the Aboriginal people at Knuckeys Lagoon on the outskirts of Darwin have been living in a “prescribed area”, regulated by the Northern Territory Emergency Response Act, 2007.

Like all residents of Aboriginal town camps in the Northern Territory they have no idea what the future holds under the Act, except for the little they read in the newspaper and hear on the radio.

In 1971 when the group was living on vacant crown land, I helped them get a water tap, until after eight years of protesting the campers were granted a lease at the end of the flight path of the International Airport, where their rudimentary houses now stand.

This week when I returned to Darwin I was reunited with Louise Bangun at Knuckeys Lagoon who was a child living under sheets of tin with her parents and siblings in 1971.

Louise’s father, mother, brother and son are all buried in the little cemetery at the community, as are the son and sisters of her aunt, May Stevens. Louise reminded me that her grandfather was killed at the camp by a falling tree when Cyclone Tracy destroyed Darwin on Christmas Day, 1974.

Louise herself was crippled by a stroke in 1996 and is confined to a wheelchair. She told me she has five surviving children and ten grandchildren who would like to live at Knuckeys Lagoon to assist her, if they had the accommodation.

Although the residents were unaware that the federal government is preparing to compulsorily acquire all Aboriginal town camps, an impromptu wreath laying ceremony was held at the graves of the founders on the second anniversary of the latest political intervention into Aboriginal lives.

By the graveside of my old mates, I shed a tear as I reflected how the hopes and aspirations of Aboriginal empowerment were once again being crushed by a distant administration.

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Above: Residents at the graves of those who fought for and won the Knuckeys Lagoon Town Camp for their people