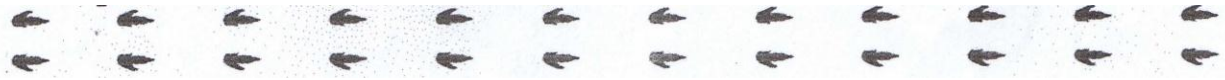


# World Council of Churches listen in Mapuru



Community update 14<sup>th</sup> September 2010

Despite Territory and Federal Governments willful neglect of small Indigenous townships (also called homelands), places like Mapuru in Arnhem Land continue to be centres of vitality, hope and peace.

A delegation from the World Council of Churches visited Mapuru today. They came to listen and to offer their encouragement, and the solidarity of the worldwide churches they represent, to the community.



There was a warm and lively welcome at the airstrip for the visitors with the traditional sounds of the yidaki (didgeridoo) and bilma (clap sticks) accompanying the dancing and singing by students of Mapuru Christian School ... which continued as a singing and dancing procession all the way back to the centre of the community. The young men, women and children wanted to make the visitors feel welcome and were so bursting with joy and pride in their culture that they just couldn't stop singing!

The community and visitors gathered under one of the bough shelters where the visitors were officially welcomed and then explained their reason for coming. Several community members expressed their heart-felt commitment to, and concerns for, Mapuru and other small indigenous townships in the face of the Government's, (both Territory and Federal), washing their hands of their responsibility to provide the same essential services as found in non-Indigenous towns across Australia.

Residents spoke of how places like Mapuru were located on ancestral estates where hundreds of generations of their family had lived and died, that this was their people's identity, their spiritual home, their sacred land, places that they were committed to, and how they wanted their children to be able to carry on living here and looking after this land, their own land, their "promised land", their homeland. *"We want our family here. We want our family to be strong. We want our kids to be strong."*

One woman said “*This community started over 40 years ago so we could have a good life*”. Other comments: *Our fathers and grandfathers established this community – so we could be happy on our own land. So we could be happy, we could feel at home. We feel safe here. And it is really for the children. We want our children to have a school where they learn their culture and language, and Yolngu (Aboriginal) and Balanda (Western) ways together. This is a good place, good and quiet – good for our kids – we don’t want them going to Galiwin’ku or other big places (where there are bad influences) – we want them in this safe place – at school in this place. We don’t want to be pushed around by Government. We want to be safe in our own home, away from places where there’s lots of trouble.*

*This is where our grandfathers and parents are buried. This is our spiritual home. This is where we want to live and maybe when it happens, to die. Government people say, "No you go to Galiwin’ku - but we say "No this is our home. This is where we will stay".*



Older community members spoke of how they, and others who have now passed away, had through their own sweat and hard work cleared an airstrip by hand with axes – no bulldozers then .. no graders and no wheelbarrows. And of how they dug with bare hands and had carried dirt and gravel from the creek on sheets of paperbark to fill in holes to make the strip level – and how now they wanted some help from the Government to make the airstrip better for the wet season. Others said the road to Mapuru had been made by a mining company in the 1965 and had no work done on it since. A number of people asked why the Government or Shire or Marthakal Homeland Resource Centre would not help them to have a good road and a good airport. The road is a really rough and bumpy track. (It takes 2-3 hours to drive the 70 kilometres from Mapuru to the Central Arnhem Road turnoff... when the going is good in the dry season).

The story was told about asking, asking, asking for a proper school, and how in the end Mapuru established its own independent, Christian School because the NT Government and Education Department would not listen or support the community’s aspirations. “*We need the school so the kids can stay here and have a good future.*” (The school commenced in July 2010 with two Balanda teachers and two Yolngu teachers and has a current enrolment of 61).

A resident spoke of the lack of support for essential services from the Government, and how the women of the community wove highly sought after baskets, and how he carved traditional wooden sculptures, as way of the community making its own money and developing its own businesses.

He talked about the need for more houses and how when he asks for houses the Government and Marthakal tell him “no more houses”. Why? (Mapuru has only nine houses for a resident population of 100 plus people).

A man spoke of how the community did what the governments and Marthakal asked of them – working for CDEP (Community Development Employment Program) and doing what was asked of them - but when the community asked the Government for help in return – nothing. *“When the community asked Marthakal – nothing happens”*. He said *“We listen to them - but they don’t listen to us! It is like they have no ears. Same story with all levels of government.”*

*“We vote for the party and people who say they will support us but they never listen to us, they never really care about us.”*

The visitors were also told about how people used to live on healthy bush tucker and walk everywhere. Then at Galiwin’ku there was a lot of unhealthy fast food. So Mapuru now has its own store (which has won a national award from the Heart Foundation). The story was told of the problems the store faced when the Basics Card was introduced for people receiving Centrelink payments. People in Mapuru had half their money quarantined into the Basics Card, but Centrelink would not let the Basics Card be used in the Mapuru store and so residents had to pay almost \$500 return to charter a plane across to Galiwin’ku for shopping for their essentials – and the Basics Card could not be used to pay for the charter flight either. The Basics Card can now be used at the store, but it took two and a half years and lots of letters and hard talking to get the decision changed.

One person summarized the situation like this: “The Government is saying there is no money for homelands (small Indigenous townships) but we want to live here and we are saying bring the same essential services to us that you take to white towns across Australia. Don’t try and make us go to the mission”. A woman said we try to make sure our kids learn “no work, no pay”. But we know we have worked and sweated for this place and we have just been asking for the Government to treat us fairly, like they treat white people - but nothing for that road, nothing for houses, nothing for our airstrip, nothing for things that would make a big difference to us.”

The visitors listened. They said they would do what they could to let people in other places all over the world know about what is happening in the Northern Territory.

Mapuru says thank you for caring enough to come and listen to us! The team were Ms **Maria Chavez Quispe**, from Bolivia, WCC (team leader), Dr **Hanna Grace**, from the Egyptian Coptic Orthodox Church, Ms **Georgia Corowa**, Coordinator, Queensland Churches Together Indigenous People's Partnership and Rev. **Sealin Garlett**, deputy chair of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecomenical Commission and minister of the Uniting Church in Australia (WA). Also thanks so much to Yingiya Guyula who came out from Darwin as a key Liya-dhalinyimirr elder and who acted as interpreter and guide for the visitors.



After all the neglect from governments, there is much to do!

Where help is needed:

- Road works on 70km track from Mapuru to Central Arnhem Road and to the nearby barge landing
- Upgrade of airstrip for safe wet season landings
- Four new houses for Mapuru families
- Two new houses for Mapuru Christian School staff
- Repair of damaged old school building to use as the store
- Funding for solar power through Bushlight
- Good internet connection to the school (for school and community use)
- Funding for sealed basketball court and clothing and equipment for competition
- Funding for AFL football team clothing, equipment and travel to matches (and maybe an oval?)
- Community troopie and trailer (with fuel allocation) for trips to tip, CDEP work, to pick up materials from the barge and container on Central Arnhem Road, to get to sporting fixtures, and for community events, hunting, and traditional activities.
- A range of real jobs at Mapuru for Mapuru residents such as
  - Support for employment and enterprise development
  - such as setting up internet sales system for selling high quality crafts.
- Regular doctor visits (currently once a month for a few hours)

These things could make a huge difference!

