

Aborigine leader accepts a house

Aboriginal "squatters" in Sherbrooke Forest have agreed to a compromise settlement of their land rights claim.

The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs (Mr. Meagher) yesterday agreed to assist the leader of the group, Mr. Lin Onus, 22, to buy a house or to provide him with low rental accommodation in any area he may choose.

In return, the Aborigines, who have been living since February 6 in a timber round-house built by Mr. Onus have decided to leave Sherbrooke Forest at the weekend.

The Government assistance for Mr. Onus consists of a grant of \$1500 towards the purchase of a house or the provision of a house for a rental as low as \$2 a week.

In a statement endorsed by Mr. Onus, Mr. Meagher said that the Sherbrooke Forest sit-in had succeeded in drawing the attention of the public and the Government to the issue of land rights.

The Government had taken the step in line with the Aboriginal Lands Act 1970, "in recognition of Mr. Onus' sincerity," Mr. Meagher said.

"The protesters have acted in a manner which clearly indicates their integrity and sense of responsibility," he added.

Mr. Onus and his band of squatters were elated last night. They said the Government's decision was a step in the right direction and paved the way for "more genuine and meaningful" discussions.

Speaking at his timber round-house in Sherbrooke Forest in the dim light of hurricane lamps, Mr. Onus said: "This is a major breakthrough for Aborigines."

"It certainly sets a precedent in the way we have achieved land rights. We intend to do more along these lines elsewhere and on a Commonwealth basis," he added.

Mr. Meagher said the round-house built at Sherbrooke Forest by the Aborigines would be preserved for public use and a plaque would be placed there to illustrate the objectives of the sit-in.

The plaque will, in part, read: "This round-house was built by a small group of Victorian Aborigines as a gesture of protest."

"Its message to all Australians is simple — Aborigines as citizens of this country are entitled to the opportunity to own the land on which they reside, thus enjoying the dignity of equality under the law."

Mr. Meagher pointed out that the protesters had acted peacefully at all times, had protected the forest area and had encouraged visitors to do the same.

Last week, two months after the Sherbrooke Forest occupation for the Bunnarong land rights claim, Mr. Onus and his followers had been told to get out by the Forest Commission, but they defied the order.

"I am happy more than anything for the liaison we have been able to establish with Mr. Meagher and the understanding reached regarding other claims we intend to pursue legally," Mr. Onus said.



ABOVE: Mr. Bill Briggs and Mr. Lin Onus study Mr. Meagher's statement in the Sherbrooke forest hut. BELOW: The round-house.

