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No treaty, but push for 'agreements'

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The Federal Government is to test a new system of agreements giving indigenous communities more say over local services, in an attempt to break the impasse over the Prime Minister's rejection of a treaty.

At a national conference on the treaty yesterday, the Indigenous Affairs Minister, Philip Ruddock, repeated the Government's opposition to a treaty, but acknowledged the need for a new relationship between the Government and indigenous people.

Mr Ruddock said there was "significant scope to further explore the development of agreements between the Government and indigenous people".

It is believed he will shortly announce a trial scheme to give indigenous communities more say over Government-funded services.

Mr Ruddock's comments came as the Governor-General, Peter Hollingworth, returned land at Barrow Creek, north of Alice Springs, to the original owners, the Kaytetye people.

Barrow Creek was the site of the Northern Territory's last massacre of Aborigines, when a reported 70 were killed in 1928 in a reprisal for the killing of a white dingo trapper.

In words similar to the Federal Parliament apology to the stolen generation, Dr Hollingworth acknowledged that there was no monument at Barrow Creek to the Aboriginal dead.

"While there are graves here to remind visitors of the tragic killing of two telegraph station employees in 1874, there is no memorial for the subsequent killings of Aboriginal people," Dr Hollingworth said.

"For this and other tragic events and deaths that took place in these parts I want to express a deep sense of sorrow and regret over things done in times past."

The Government also came under renewed pressure to do more to quell indigenous family violence and child abuse.

The Opposition spokeswoman, Carmen Lawrence, criticised the failure of the Office of the Status of Women to spend \$4.3 million in money earmarked for domestic violence despite the widespread recognition of pressing problems in indigenous communities.

At the treaty conference, the chairman of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, Geoff Clark, welcomed Mr Ruddock's speech.

"His tone was probably more appropriate this time around than on other occasions," Mr Clark said, referring to earlier clashes with the Government over the treaty issue.

"The process towards a final settlement in this country is a process of agreement-making ... It's creeping up on them and they don't even know it."

Mr Clark said ATSIC already had agreements with every state and territory government over policy issues.

Mr Ruddock said "many more people are recognising that we need to shape a new relationship between indigenous people and governments if we are to achieve the rate of progress that is needed".

Any new relationship should not be based on welfare dependency but on self-reliance and shared responsibility.

But Mr Ruddock said that to move forward, the Government and indigenous Australians needed to clarify those areas of difference, and reach an understanding of matters that might need to be set aside "in order not to delay progress on those matters which we jointly wish to pursue".