

# The Australian

## UN indigenous forum erupts in anger over Tiwi lease plan

**David Nason, New York correspondent**  
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ANGRY exchanges between government officials and black activists over John Howard's plan to introduce private home ownership on Aboriginal traditional lands have taken centre stage at the annual session of the UN's Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues.

The hostilities seem certain to continue next week when the activists, including former Democrats senator Aden Ridgeway, push to have the forum's final communiqué criticise the Howard Government for riding roughshod over Aboriginal rights.

The dispute centres on the Government's plan to lease the Northern Territory township of Nguiu on Bathurst Island, in a system that would allow the local Tiwi people to apply for loans to buy new homes. The traditional owners would retain the underlying Aboriginal title, receive a guaranteed \$5million in rent for the first 15 years and have 25 new houses built, along with new health, sporting and educational facilities.

In New York yesterday, Les Malezar of the Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action said the initiative was a "forced policy" that was against the rights and interests of indigenous people.

Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner Mick Dodson said the home ownership scheme was a "take it or leave it" plan designed to benefit non-Aboriginal people, without negotiation or equal partnership.

Greg Rush, a Department of Family Services and Indigenous Affairs staffer, insisted the scheme was voluntary and negotiations with the traditional owners on Bathurst Island had taken five months.

He said Mr Dodson's claim that whites would benefit most was "simply incorrect".

Brian Wyatt of the National Native Title Council backed Mr Dodson, saying the Tiwis had been conned into signing away management control of their communal lands for four generations in exchange for homes and basic services the Government regularly provided to other people without such preconditions. The Tiwis had essentially lost the right to stop any development that ran counter to their cultural and environmental responsibilities, he said.

<http://www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,20867,21757280-2702,00.html>