

Indigenous rights activists protest on Australia Day

AFP – Tens of thousands of Australians protested over the treatment of Indigenous people on Sunday as the country celebrated a national holiday marking the 1788 arrival of British colonisers.

Crowds rallied in Sydney, Melbourne and other cities on Australia Day, decrying the high incarceration rates, poor health and historic persecution of the continent's first inhabitants, whose ancestry stretches back 60,000 years.

The January 26 national day commemorates the arrival of a British fleet in Sydney Harbour to establish a penal colony.

For many Australians, it is a day to celebrate with friends and family at beaches and backyard barbecues.

But for rights activists "Invasion Day" marks a period of oppression of Indigenous peoples, including the dispossession of their lands, massacres, and the removal of children from their families.

In Melbourne, thousands of demonstrators took to the streets, some brandishing placards proclaiming "Abolish the Date" and "No Pride in Genocide".

"It's about changing the date, but it's more about making people aware of our injustices that have been since, and still ongoing since white man came," said Indigenous woman Tammy Miller.

"We're still here fighting the same things that my grandparents were, but seeing all the people here makes me so proud," she told AFP.

In the run-up to Australia Day, vandals poured red paint over a statue in Sydney of British explorer James Cook, toppled a

monument in Melbourne to a 19th century pioneer, and daubed a war memorial in the city with the words: "Land Back".

– Division over national day –

At a citizenship ceremony in Canberra for 24 immigrants – one of nearly 300 held around the country – Prime Minister Anthony Albanese hailed "the unique privilege that we have of sharing this oldest continent with the world's oldest continuous culture".

"It is a responsibility all of us owe to future generations to safeguard our social cohesion, to uphold Australian fairness and continue Australia's progress," he said.

The choice of January 26 as the national day has long divided Australians.

A Resolve Strategic survey published Friday in the Sydney Morning Herald indicated support for the holiday date had grown over the past two years from 47 percent to 61 percent.

Attitudes appeared to have hardened since a constitutional referendum on Indigenous rights reforms was heavily defeated on October 14, 2023, the paper said.

An estimated 3.8 percent of Australia's 26 million people are Indigenous, official data shows.

Indigenous people still have a life expectancy eight years shorter than other Australians, higher rates of incarceration, more youth unemployment, and poorer education.

AFP