

The dispossessed

U.N. gives native people chance to state their case

By Glenn Morris

The United Nations has declared 1993 as the International Year for Indigenous Peoples. The year provides, among other goals, an opportunity for settler states, i.e., those countries constructed over the lands and lives of the native peoples originally living there, to consider the methods by which settler societies have expanded.

In Australia, Prime Minister Paul Keating used the kickoff of the international year to acknowledge and apologize for the colonial invasion of aboriginal lands. He reminded his fellow colonists "that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the disease. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers . . . We failed to ask . . . how would we feel if this were done to me?"

No United States federal official has yet been as forthright as Keating, but if he or she were, the apology might begin in Hawaii. Although Hawaii was not the first example of United States colonialism against indigenous peoples, and it may not have been the bloodiest, it certainly ranks among the most egregious and violative of international legal principles. Last week marked the 100th anniversary of the invasion, occupation and seizure of Hawaii by United States Marines and their corporate allies.

From the time Europeans first stumbled onto the Hawaiian paradise in 1778, and far into the 19th century, Hawaii was recognized internationally as a legitimate, independent, sovereign state. The official U.S. position was that no foreign power, itself included, had the right to conquer, colonize or seize control of Hawaii. That policy was abandoned in 1893 when powerful economic interests, including the Dole family of pineapple fame, persuaded the U.S. minister to Hawaii to order the Marines to the islands to affect the overthrow of the native Hawaiian government.

Despite President Grover Cleveland's opposition to the invasion, calling it a "lawless occupation . . . under false pretexts by the United States forces," he refused to order U.S. forces out of the islands or the reinstatement of Liliuokalani, the legitimate ruler of the Hawaiian nation.

The annexation of Hawaii to the United States was consolidated under President William McKinley in 1898.

Hawaii was clearly a colony prior to 1959. (So was Alaska, for that matter.) Under well-settled international principles of decolonization, such a colony, when exercising its right to political self-determination, possesses three options. First, it may choose independence from the colonizing power. Second, it may choose to integrate into the colonial power, or third, it may take an in-between path of free association. Through this final option it retains some of its inherent sovereign authority, and voluntarily relinquishes some to the colonial power. Whatever the choice, this exercise of self-determination is supposed to be reflected through an internationally-supervised plebiscite.

In Hawaii, as in other cases where the colonial power thoroughly undermines and supplants the power of indigenous peoples, the question of whom should be allowed to vote in the plebiscite becomes a complex one. Virtually everyone agrees that the indigenous people get to vote. But how much should the native vote be diluted by those who arrived in the territory during the colonial period? Presumably, the interests of the indigenous people and the colonists will not be identical. Such was the case in the 1959 vote on Hawaiian statehood.

If only native Hawaiians had been allowed to vote on the decolonization of their homeland, almost assuredly statehood would have been rejected, and Hawaii might well be an independent country today. Evidence of this is indicated by an analysis of the vote. The

only majority native Hawaiian electoral district, Niihau, resoundingly rejected statehood. The remainder of the islands had been so effectively populated by non-native Hawaiians that the native sentiment was drowned out.

The analogy to this would be if several associates and I forcibly occupied 80% of the apartment complex you owned and lived in. Despite your protests, we decide to hold an election on the question of whether you get your apartment complex back. Not surprisingly, you lose the election because you now control only 20% of it, and the title to your building now transfers to me and my friends who, after all, have a higher and "more civilized" use for it.

Recently, a movement for native Hawaiian sovereignty has been revived, and it is calling for a re-examination of the relationship between native Hawaiians and the U.S. government. While this movement has not called for the emigration of non-native Hawaiians, it is demanding recognition of the historic territorial, political and religious rights of the indigenous peoples.

The International Year for Indigenous Peoples, and the centennial of the invasion of Hawaii, provide a golden opportunity for the people of the United States to outline a new and progressive relationship with indigenous peoples in Hawaii, and throughout the United States.

As Prime Minister Keating concluded, the continuation of injustice stems "from our failure to imagine these things being done to us." But, concluding on an optimistic note, he said, "If we can imagine the injustice, we can imagine its opposite. . . . We have to give meaning to 'justice' and 'equity' — and . . . we will only give them meaning when we commit ourselves to achieving concrete results."

This year provides an opportunity for people and their governments to embark on a serious re-examination of their policies toward indigenous peoples and achieve concrete, just results.