AIPP is appalled by the blowing up of the 46,000 years-old sacred site of the Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura Peoples

Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact (AIPP) is shocked to learn about the blowing up of the 46,000-year-old sacred cave of the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura (PKKP) peoples on May 24th, 2020. The sacred cave destroyed is a heritage with historical significance not just for the Puutu Kunti Kurrama and Pinikura Peoples but for the global society as a whole.

Burchel Hayes, the spokesperson of the PKKP people, in a statement said, “Now, if this site has been destroyed, then we can tell them stories but we can’t show them photographs or take them out there to stand at the rock shelter and say: this is where your ancestors lived, starting 46,000 years ago.” These words echo the voices of the Indigenous Peoples across the globe, where businesses have destroyed sacred sites that underpin their roots, traditions, culture and spirituality.

We stand in deep solidarity with the custodians of the land who had fought for years to protect the site. It is unbelievable and unacceptable that the act has been attributed to a mere mistake committed by Rio Tinto. It is a failure of systems and values. More value has been placed on rocks under the ground than the Indigenous Peoples and their unique cultures and heritage.

The response from Rio Tinto and the Australian government so far is far from satisfactory. The Australian government and Rio Tinto both publicly support the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights that require governments to protect human rights, and businesses to respect human rights, including the rights of Indigenous Peoples. Both Australian governments and Rio Tinto publicly support the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. Weak local legal protections are no defence for this crime.

We appreciate the Australian government’s apology to the Indigenous Peoples in the country for generations of injustices committed to them. Indigenous Peoples in Asia have been looking up to the Australian government for having laid the path towards reconciliation. However, this incident seems to imply disrespect and injustice that is rooted in the historical prejudices against Indigenous Peoples.

Rio Tinto has clearly breached the rights of the traditional owners. Australian governments have failed in their responsibility to protect these rights of the Indigenous Peoples. Commitments will be measured in the consequences for these breaches. What action will Australia take? What action will Rio Tinto take? Will individuals be held accountable? What redress will be offered? What steps will be taken to strengthen the governments protection of Indigenous Peoples’ rights? Will Australia apply the OECD Guidelines on Multinational Enterprises to Rio Tinto?

We call upon the Australian government and businesses to stop abusing Indigenous Peoples’ cultural heritage and rights. Further, an independent enquiry into the incident must be carried out and the matter must be dealt with fairly based on established facts.
We hope this incident does not become a hindrance to the reconciliatory process and in remedying the historical injustices. We also hope that it does not become a barrier to the new future that the people of Australia and Indigenous Peoples hope to build together.

At the least, the Government of Australia should pass the new Aboriginal Heritage Bill to ensure protection of their rights with proper procedures for signing agreements with business, including the right to appeal and amendment.

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