Australia’s wake up call from the UN: Yes, we’re a racist country

The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights says Australia is racist. And she’s right. Racial discrimination in Australia is not idiosyncratic; it is enshrined in laws, policies and practices.

Navi Pillay is one of the most credible global human rights advocates, and her comments should shame the Australian government into reversing discriminatory policies.

Her concerns point to the inhumane treatment of people judged, she said, by their differences – racial, colour or religion.

She particularly singled out the government’s Malaysia Plan for refugees and the Northern Territory intervention. As a South African, Pillay is well placed to recognise racial discrimination. This should be a wake up call for Australia.

The hidden men

I pen these words in Derby, a small community in the remote far north of Western Australia, home to a large Aboriginal community. It is also now prison (again) to detained asylum seekers in the Curtin Immigration Detention Centre.

The disturbing question raised by Indigenous leader Lowitja O’Donoghue in 2003 is as relevant today as it was then: “How is it that the nation’s First Peoples and its last peoples should suffer similar indignity?”

Although deeply concerned about the injustices that Australia’s Aboriginal peoples continue to endure, I am here in Derby for another reason.

It is the last peoples I have come to visit. The juxtaposition of the First Peoples and the last peoples is striking, except that one group is clearly visible and the other represents what my colleague Caroline Fleay calls The Hidden Men.

These men are forgotten asylum seekers effectively in exile in the harsh desert, far away from home and far away from the support that mainstream Australia may offer. They are losing their minds and they are losing their hope.

After garnering evidence in the People’s Inquiry into Detention about the enormity of harms of mandatory detention, we called for the removal of racism from immigration policy as well as the restoration of human rights and the reinstatement of accountability. Little has been achieved since the findings were published in Human Rights Overboard three years ago.

The suffering of the last people

Racism continues in Australia. Like Aboriginal people who are portrayed as so dysfunctional that the Racial Discrimination Act was suspended, the “criminalised” asylum seeker is dealt with outside domestic and international legal norms and outside the realm of human compassion.

The Hidden Men I saw on the weekend are suffering deeply, and culpability rests squarely on the shoulders of the Australian Government.

Eminent QC Julian Burnside once commented that former Prime Minister Howard’s enthusiasm for mandatory
detention made him guilty of crimes against humanity when judged by his own laws.

Regrettably, a change in government has not brought a change of heart.

The concerns I expressed in The Conversation recently are confirmed after my visit to Curtin – that “Keeping people out of sight and out of mind in remote locations dishonours a human rights-respecting nation”.

Blindly, the government rejects Nillay’s assertions stating that “Australian laws do not discriminate on the grounds of race, religion or ethnic identity”.

A former detainee once told me that the first time he felt truly welcome in Australia was when he visited a remote Aboriginal community as part of his work.

It is time that the rest of us extend the same welcome. Lowitja O’Donoghue’s words continue to resonate. Navi Pillay is right.