

# *Arrests at Australia Day protests urging Indigenous recognition*

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Police make arrests on Tuesday as protesters on Australia Day in Sydney demand that the country's national day be changed. (Photo: Loren Elliott / Reuters)

Sydney, January 26 (RHC)-- Police made arrests in Australia on Tuesday as thousands of people defied public health concerns and protested against the mistreatment of Indigenous people on the day marking the 1788 arrival of the British First Fleet.

For many Indigenous Australians, who trace their lineage on the continent back tens of thousands of years, the Australia Day holiday is known as Invasion Day -- symbolising the destruction of their cultures by European settlers.

In Sydney, Indigenous groups called for protests to demand the national day be changed, although state health officials have refused to make an exemption to social-distancing rules to allow for crowds of more than 500 people. Television footage showed protesters gathering early on Tuesday in small groups to comply with the limits.

Police have warned protesters could face fines and imprisonment for breaching public health orders designed to limit the spread of the novel coronavirus. Images published by news organisations as well as on social media showed police dragging several protesters away from the march in Sydney.

In Melbourne, rally organisers said protesters would be sorted into groups of 100 people with 10 metres (30 feet) between each to comply with social-distancing rules. Images posted on social media, however, showed a larger group of masked protesters gathered at one of the major intersections of the city. They held up their fists in the air and chanted: "One Voice."

While thousands of people flocked to beaches and picnic spots around the country to celebrate the national day, many official events were cancelled due to coronavirus restrictions. Australia has fared better than most other developed economies in the pandemic, with just under 28,800 cases and 909 deaths, mostly in Victoria state. Victoria recorded its 20th straight day on Tuesday with no local transmission.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison said Australia Day represents how far the country has come since the First Fleet arrived. "There is no escaping or cancelling this fact," Morrison said at a ceremony in Canberra. "For better and worse, it was the moment where the journey to our modern nation began."

Anthony Albanese, leader of Australia's Labor Party, said that the country has to acknowledge that its history "doesn't date back to 1788. It dates back more than 65,000 years. "Australia Day means different things to different people. For me, it's a chance to acknowledge the past, recognise the present, and hope for the future."

Grace Tame, who was declared as Australian of the Year on Monday, also weighed in expressing her support for a change of date of national day. "It costs us nothing as a nation to actually change that date. And it would mean a lot to that community and to our national community. I think that's important," she said in an interview with The Age and the Sydney Morning Herald newspapers.

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