

PM to turn down plea for native land rights

From MICHELLE GRATTAN

CANBERRA. — Aboriginal land rights based on traditional association will be rejected this week by the Prime Minister (Mr. McMahon).

He is expected to make his statement on Aboriginal land rights policy in a pamphlet to be issued on Wednesday — Australia Day.

A fresh controversy has blown up on the eve of the Prime Minister's announcement.

It was learned yesterday that the Government is considering an application from Nabalco Pty. Ltd. for a forestry licence to establish a wood-chip industry on about 5000 square miles of the Gove Peninsular in the Arnhem Land Aboriginal Reserve.

The Yirrkala people have before Mr. McMahon a petition that seeks ownership over the land at Gove.

The Melbourne lawyer for the Yirrkala people, Mr. Frank Purcell, predicted last night that violence would be the ultimate result if the Government "parcelled out the Arnhem Land reserve to economic empires to make money from".

He said: "A licence to cut timber would put effective control of the land in the hands of those holding the licence.

"The Government's policy is a hark-back to the days of slavery. The Government is pushing these Aborigines out of any situation of bargaining power."

The Yirrkala Aborigines' reactions to the Nabalco proposal would be one of "immense anger".

He said: "They feel the anger of any property owner who sees a stranger coming in and taking his property away. This land is their church as well as their home.

The Aborigines should be allowed to bargain with Nabalco on a basis of equality — as proprietors of the land.

In a submission to the Federal Government, Nabalco has offered the Aboriginal community a ten per cent equity in the develop-

ment of the wood-chip industry and representation on the board of a new company that would develop the enterprise. The Aborigines would pay for their share out of dividends.

Nabalco, which belongs to the Gove Joint Venture Company — 70 per cent. Swiss-owner — at present has a bauxite mining venture on 200 square miles of Gove Peninsula. The mining venture is costing \$310 million to develop.

Nabalco indicated to the Government that it would not go ahead with the project if the Yirrkala people were given ownership of the land.

Nabalco wanted an assurance that permission to carry out forestry operations would continue whatever the title to the land.

The company felt it would be placed in an "invidious position" if it was ever required to contest in court against Aborigines any question relating to title of the land or the right to take timber from it.

No comment

Nabalco's chairman (Mr. David Griffin) refused last night to comment on Nabalco's submission.

A decision on the proposal is likely in two or three months.

The Government is understood to favor giving a licence to an Aboriginal company, conditional on the company negotiating with Nabalco — or some other firm — to set up a wood-chip enterprise.

However, the Commonwealth Council for Aboriginal Affairs, under the chairmanship of Dr. H. C. Coombs, is likely to oppose the Nabalco proposal.

It has sought to get ownership of enterprises in Aboriginal areas into Aboriginal hands—or, in the case of large ventures, to achieve a substantial degree of Aboriginal equity.

Delayed

The proposal for the wood-chip industry was first mooted in 1968. Nabalco did a feasibility study. However, further negotiation was delayed until after the Northern Territory Supreme Court test case in which the Yirrkala people sought land rights over tribal areas of Arnhem Land.

They lost their case. Nabalco expects that the proposed wood-chip industry would employ about 100 Aborigines on a full-time basis.

The company estimates that it would cost \$14 million to establish the industry.

The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs (Mr. Howson) said last night the Government would consider Nabalco's proposal.