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Mugabe may raise the plight of Aborigines

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By MICHAEL DOYLE

The Australian Council of Churches expects the Prime Minister of Zimbabwe, Mr Mugabe, to raise the plight of Aborigines when he arrives in Melbourne next week for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

The council said yesterday that Mr Mugabe or audience members were likely to raise the Aboriginal issue at a public meeting he had agreed to address at Monash University next Tuesday night.

The topic of the meeting — organised by the churches' 'One World Week' committee and the All African Students' Union — will be southern Africa and Zimbabwe.

But the council's education officer, Mr Greg Thompson, said yesterday: "We made it clear to Mr Mugabe that the theme was not only confined to global issues, but also the issues of injustice and land rights in Australia."

The Aboriginal issue is potentially embarrassing for the Australian Government. The Prime Minister of Vanuatu, Mr Lini, already has promised to discuss it with his Australian counterpart, Mr Fraser.

In another development yesterday, the chairman of the council's Aboriginal advisory committee, Mr Gary Foley, criticised the council's "political opportunism" in organising the meeting without consulting Aborigines.

Mr Mugabe requested and received a copy of the report by the World Council of Churches team which toured Australia in July to inspect the conditions of Aboriginal communities. The report found that Aborigines had



been denigrated socially and spiritually by hostile Governments, paternalistic churches, indifferent bureaucrats and brutal law officers.

The council's information officer, Mr Russell Rollason, said Mr Mugabe had met members of the team in Zimbabwe soon after their Australian mission, and had "expressed concern" to them about Aborigines' conditions.

"So he is aware of the problem. He is a very diplomatic person so the manner in which he raises it could be in very diplomatic terms," Mr Rollason said. "But I would expect him to raise it either in public or privately at the CHOGM."

Announcing Mr Mugabe's agreement to address the meeting, the council's general secretary, Miss Jean Skuse, said she hoped it would provide an opportunity for churches and other aid agencies to reflect on the "responsibilities of churches to those struggling against poverty and injustice both here in Australia and around the world".

Mr Foley, who is also secretary of the National Aboriginal and Islander Health Organisation and director of the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service, said of Mr Mugabe's planned address:

"They (the council) are running ahead and organising these things without telling us for their own personal and organisational promotion.

"They are virtually negating many of the positive things that the WCC team said about the Australian Council of Churches and about real Aboriginal involvement in organisation.

"This will be the number one item on the agenda for the (council's) Aboriginal advisory committee on Friday. They will get a serve on Friday."

Asked whether Aborigines would attend the public meeting, he said it would depend on the result of the committee's meeting on Friday.

Mr Foley said Mr Lini had agreed to visit the health service's Fitzroy headquarters when he arrived next week. At least two other government leaders were considering the same invitation.

He said police had interviewed him yesterday about events planned to draw attention to the plight of Aborigines during CHOGM. He had given them little detail, he said.

Mr Foley said no demonstrations were planned "at this stage". Asked whether Aborigines would organise their own forum to air grievances, he replied: "Maybe. Some of the things we are planning will have to have very much a surprise element about them."

Mr Rollason said he was surprised by Mr Foley's criticisms. He said the council was only abiding by the World Council of Churches' recommendation that the Aboriginal issue should be "internationalised" as much as possible.