

## THE AUSTRALIAN

# 'Blackbirder' families want reparation

ROWAN CALLICK, ASIA-PACIFIC EDITOR THE AUSTRALIAN AUGUST 15, 2013 12:00AM



Emelda Davis, head of the Australian South Sea Islanders association in Sydney yesterday. Members of her family were 'blackbirded' to Australia to work. Picture Sam Mooy Source: TheAustralian

**EMELDA Davis is leading the fight for her community of 40,000 Australians to be recognised, 150 years this week after the first boat set sail from Vanuatu to bring their ancestors to work as indentured labourers on the Queensland canefields.**

"It's the right time," said Ms Davis, the president of the interim association of Australian South Sea Islanders. "There's a revitalisation of the community and now we'll keep moving forward."

The Queensland government has committed to collaborating with the association, she said, and a debate on ASSI is scheduled for the NSW parliament today.

They are supported by Moana Carcasses Kalosil, the Prime Minister of Vanuatu. Many of the islanders came from Vanuatu and the nearby Melanesian nation of Solomon Islands.

Mr Kalosil has described the 41-year period of bringing labourers from the Melanesian islands as "shameful".

Some were "blackbirded", press-ganged to join the boats.

Professor of Pacific and Australian history at the University of Queensland Clive Moore will deliver a lecture today revealing that about \$38 million in today's money was appropriated by the state

government of the day from the wages of the 15,000 Melanesian labourers who died in the canefields.

"At best, the process was immoral and, at worst, lacking fiduciary duty," he will say.

Most wages were withheld until the workers had completed their contracts, so if they died, years of wages had accumulated.

From 1863 to 1904, when the new Australian Federation halted the flow of non-white workers, 62,475 labour contracts were signed with islanders.

Acts of parliament were passed to safeguard return fares and to ensure the wages of deceased islanders were returned to their families.

But Professor Moore will say that only 15 per cent of the withheld wages were returned to relatives, partly because there was no mechanism to send them on to their families in the islands.

There was a 24-30 per cent death rate, in part because they lacked immunity from new diseases, and the commonwealth deployed Queensland to use money from the fund to deport those who were no longer welcome, as non-whites, after Federation in 1901.

"Compensation to islander families may now be difficult, but acknowledgment that this travesty occurred is a necessary part of healing for the ASSI community," Professor Moore will say.

He proposes - with the backing of Ms Davis - that the state and federal governments establish a trust fund to help educate and provide health benefits to islanders and help them reconnect with their extended families back in the Pacific.