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Eleanor Hall hosts The World Today's lunch hour of current affairs, with background and debate from Australia and the world. Monday to Friday, 12:10pm, ABC Local Radio.

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Kiwirrkurra people return home

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The World Today - Friday, 13 September, 2002
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Reporter: David Weber

The people of the Kiwirrkurra Aboriginal community in Australia's Western Desert are the most remote community of Aboriginals in the world.

They're just going back home after they were evacuated because of flooding over a year and a half ago. And while the Kwirrkurra people were away being looked after elsewhere, they had a major victory. They were granted native title over a vast area of Central Australia from Lake Mackay into the Gibson Desert.

As David Weber reports from the desert, they now face another challenge.

(ABORIGINAL CONVERSATION)

DAVID WEBER: If you're looking for inhospitable country Kwirrkurra's about as tough as it gets. Dry and dusty all year round, temperatures in the Gibson Desert top 50 degrees celsius. Rain is rare but when it does come down it comes in buckets. Three cyclones in 2000 caused the water table to rise so when the rains hit last year, the whole community had to be evacuated.

Now the people are finally coming home. Community leader Jimmy Brown says he's pleased to be bringing everyone back now the facilities have been repaired. He says they're all coming back to Kwirrkurra just like a boomerang.

JIMMY BROWN: (It's) good to be back in this land and I'm, so I am happy to be here, to be back on my community, back to the school, back to our home. We've been like to come back, the boomerang, come back, back to home, and the people are here to be happy to be here.

DAVID WEBER: Mike Harper is probably more pleased than anyone. He spent the past 18 months at Kwirrkurra,

waiting for the waters to subside and for the people to come back.

MIKE HARPER: When people left here in early March, I think we all felt by the end of March we'd be back. Then we had another flood mid-March, and another one later on. And the months just went on and really time went very quickly for me because I was expecting it to end any minute, but it just didn't. The water stayed here.

It was lonely at times but mainly, I had a lot of communication from the people while they were away. They phoned me and sent me emails, so I sort of kept up to date and people talking to me all the time.

DAVID WEBER: It must be great to have everybody back in person.

MIKE HARPER: It's great, it's tremendous to see people back and they're so happy too. You can see, just looking around, the looks on their faces. They are so pleased to be back in their own land.

DAVID WEBER: The people of Kwirrkurra have formed one of the stronger communities in the central desert area. They needed that strength over the past 18 months. They were split up and sent to different places, Kintore, Morapoi, Balgo and Alice Springs.

Kwirrkurra's a dry community, and some people were being forced to deal with the rigors of alcohol for the first time.

ATSIC commissioner Preston Thomas.

PRESTON THOMAS: They went through a lot of, a lot of pain as from shifting from one place to the other. And it's something that, it's one of those things that happen here that nobody would have thought of, flooding in the desert.

DAVID WEBER: How did they cope with challenges like alcohol and petrol sniffing, being exposed to things like that for the first time for some people?

PRESTON THOMAS: It was really horrific really because when they were shifted, like when they went to Alice Springs, there was, alcohol was there. Then they went from Alice Springs to Morapoi and they had an outlet there of alcohol. And it was really horrific. That's why, in the end I think they just had enough of it, and they thought, well, we're going to move.

And they just got up and moved. Because some of the leaders, which is, the leader's the one that was really the backbone of that, of the community. When they seen that, what their people was getting into, they said, you know, they said, enough's enough. And they told the people, we are going. So they just got up one morning and said we are going and they, and they did that move.

DAVID WEBER: The floods brought one benefit. They

created a lake that's attracting wildlife like kangaroos, bush turkeys and emus. Even the dogs have returned. Many of them perished in March last year and won't be coming back.

But several floods in consecutive years could be a pointer to more problems in the future.

Western Australia's Indigenous Affairs Minister, Alan Carpenter.

ALAN CARPENTER: A tremendous amount of work has been put in here, ground works to try and build up levy banks around the place to ensure that if the occasion arose again where there was a lot of flooding, then the waters would be redirected around the community and would bypass the community.

I think most of the people would be satisfied that everything that could be done has now been done to prevent a likelihood of a recurrence. But if there was torrential flooding two or three years in a row, all the earthworks and all the ground works may not be sufficient to prevent it happening again. But we're all hopeful it won't happen again.

JOHN HIGHFIELD: Alan Carpenter is the Indigenous Affairs Minister in the state of Western Australia. David Weber with him in the Gibson Desert, for *The World Today*.

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