



**COMMONWEALTH
SECRETARY-GENERAL**

H E Rt Hon Donald C McKinnon

**Statement by the
Commonwealth Secretary-General
Rt Hon Don McKinnon**

**to the High Level Segment of the
UN Human Rights Council**

**Wednesday, 14 March 2007
Geneva, Switzerland**

14 March 2007, Wednesday, 12:30
Rt Hon Don McKinnon, Commonwealth Secretary-General
UN Human Rights Council
Geneva, Switzerland

Mr Chairman, High Commissioner, Excellencies, Distinguished Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen

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I am honoured to address you today on behalf of the Commonwealth of 53 countries. We account for one third of the world's population, in countries large and small, rich and poor. We embrace people of every colour and creed.

We are an organization whose members belong for the reason that they share a commitment to certain values and principles. Fundamental human rights are part of the cement that binds us.

Human rights are as universal as they are indivisible. It is my task to ensure that they are kept so, individually and collectively, in the Commonwealth. It is this Council's task to ensure that they are kept so, individually and collectively, across the globe.

When we talk of human rights, words and actions should also be indivisible, whether in the Commonwealth, the UN Human Rights Council, or beyond.

Human rights are both the simplest of absolutes and the loftiest of ideals. But this chamber in Geneva is a world away from the reality of the countless numbers who have been raped or tortured, or the children who never get into school.

The right to life, the right to trial, the right to vote, the right to education: these are just some of the human rights which have been debated - and desecrated - since the mists of time.

So it will always pay for us here to remember our real *constituents*: the *victims* of human rights abuses as well as the many *foot-soldiers* of the fight to turn back those abuses – people like the local NGOs and human rights defenders, the journalists, politicians and others who risk their lives for the values and principles we all share.

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Mr Chairman, I speak today to one human rights organization *on behalf of* another. Because the modern Commonwealth is, without doubt, a human rights organization.

The principles enshrined by our Heads of Government in their Declarations of 1971 and 1991 include the protection and promotion of democracy, of fundamental human rights, and of equality for all our citizens.

We have converted those words and commitments into action. We have successfully developed a political mechanism to deal with members who persistently or seriously violate our principles.

Those who do so can be excluded from our councils and even have their membership suspended – and we are especially vigilant and responsive in situations where there has been an illegal overthrow of an elected government.

Meanwhile we have a dedicated Human Rights Unit helping our governments defend and apply human rights. It also works closely with civil society organizations.

One of the ways in which we assist governments is in meeting their Treaty obligations.

I am pleased that all Commonwealth countries are signatories to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. I am less encouraged that some of our members have yet to ratify the UN conventions on, amongst others, racial discrimination and discrimination against women.

These are big omissions – and we aim to help our member countries address them.

Some Commonwealth countries have yet to ratify the two 40-year old UN Covenants which give formal expression to universal social and economic, and civil and political, rights.

The Commonwealth is determined to show global leadership on human rights, and for that reason ratification of these two Covenants is vital. I think it possible that we will see a day when accession to these two Covenants and other major human rights instruments becomes the minimum standard for becoming a Commonwealth member.

Mr Chairman, many Commonwealth member countries tell us that they lack the capacity to examine where human rights treaties do and don't match their

national legislation and local conditions. They also ask what they would have to do to bring them into force, and how they can report regularly on the way they enact them.

32 of our member countries are small states and are confronted with such challenges. They are those, not of political will, but of capacity.

Last year, the Commonwealth produced a *Handbook* to address those concerns. We offer tailored support to countries which need it.

Also last year, we held a workshop on ratification of the Covenants in the Caribbean, and in a fortnight will run one for the Pacific region.

Our practical assistance also extends to human rights training. In the last 18 months, we have given training to Police forces in 19 countries, mostly in Africa and the Indian Ocean. Next week we are training the Police forces of 10 Pacific Island states, and plan to do the same in the Caribbean and South Asia.

We also give active support to some 60 National Human Rights Institutions, or 'NHRIs', across 20 of our member countries. Some struggle, some are badly funded – but most are extremely effective.

We are particularly proud of the *Commonwealth Best Practice Guidelines for NHRIs* – the definitive guide to setting them up, staffing them, defining their mandates and practical roles, and ensuring that they are accountable and accessible. The publication also gave guidance on the human rights aspects of issues like conflict, race, environment, migrants and refugees, women and young people.

Two weeks ago, Commonwealth NHRIs gathered in London and achieved a new milestone when they agreed to establish a Commonwealth Forum for their organisations.

In the last couple of years the Commonwealth has helped in reconstituting the Human Rights Commissions in Cameroon and the Maldives, and we are now helping to establish new ones in Swaziland and Papua New Guinea. These are long and often painstaking processes: it takes time.

We have a model curriculum on human rights which we have developed for Commonwealth universities.

We ensure that human rights considerations are brought into all Commonwealth policy work, and into our practical programmes in areas like health, education, gender equality and counter-terrorism measures.

And some of you will even have taken part in the Commonwealth 'Human Rights Forum' which is part of the parallel events alongside our biennial Heads of Government meetings.

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Mr Chairman, I have spoken of the priority we place in the Commonwealth on words matching deeds. We expect the same of this new Council. So do weak and vulnerable men, women and children the world over.

The Commonwealth already works well with the OHCHR. Today, I repeat our resolve to work with this Human Rights Council in any way possible. The Commonwealth accounts for more than a quarter of your membership.

Establishing this rejuvenated Council as the principal world body on human rights is a fitting tribute to millions of human rights victims and human rights defenders, and to humanity at large.

But the decision to establish this Council came with a message, that the time for action had come. There is no shortage of legislation and declarations on human rights; what is in crisis is the resolve to *act* on those commitments.

This Council's success will be judged by the extent to which it achieves its mandate, in a markedly more effective and efficient manner than its predecessor.

The previous Commission had its merits – particularly in the way it set out universal standards on human rights through the treaty system, in its so-called 'special procedures mechanisms', and in its efforts to accommodate NGOs.

But its failings overcame it. The power of credibility was overshadowed by the reality of a body which had become politicized, unresponsive, and unable to achieve its mandate. Let the lessons be learnt, and may those mistakes not be repeated.

This Council must be representative, effective, credible, and accountable. I therefore strongly believe that a system of universal peer review is required. I also believe that the process of dialogue by which this occurs will say almost as much as the eventual outcomes.

If this Council shields just one jurisdiction which displays a blatant abuse of Human Rights, it will discredit itself for ever.

Every person on this planet is entitled to full support from this Council, regardless of state, geography, race, religion. I pledge to you and to this Council a Commonwealth commitment to the universal cause of human rights, and to your success. Thank you. **ENDS**