

26 February 2007, Monday  
Rt Hon Don McKinnon, Commonwealth Secretary-General  
**Commonwealth Conference of National Human Rights Institutions**  
London, UK

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Ladies and Gentlemen, a very warm welcome to Commonwealth headquarters.

There is something incongruous, isn't there, about this....

*This magnificent room....*

.... that may seem so far away from the reality of human rights abuses and the way that we deal with them. And yet this is in fact the room in which, over 40 years, Commonwealth Heads of Government and Ministers have met and forged our unity over our most deeply-held principles, many of which are built around human rights.

Only two months ago, right here, Commonwealth foreign ministers took a stand against the armed overthrow of a democratically elected Fijian government, and with it the human rights abuses perpetrated then and since by the Fijian army. And Fiji was suspended from the Councils of the Commonwealth, with the TV cameras rolling.

And then there is *us in our suits* ....

.... you, some of the world's leading experts on human rights... an extraordinary pool of talent, experience and goodwill.

... and me, no expert, but passionately committed to the clause.

You will 'talk shop' these next two days, and no doubt some rhetoric will creep in – it always does; it probably should. But we are a world away, aren't we, from the victims of human rights abuses. The legions who have been raped or tortured; the children who never get into school; the child labourers. The right to life, the right to trial, the right to vote, the right to education – these are just some of a host of fundamental human freedoms and entitlements which have been debated – and desecrated – since the mists of time.

So I think it will pay for us – on and off in the next few days – to remember our real *constituents*, both the victims of human rights abuses, and also the many *foot-soldiers* of the fight to turn back those abuses. The local NGOs, the local journalists and local people, who risk their lives for their beliefs.

Kofi Annan, in one of his last speeches as UN Secretary-General, quoted US President Truman. "If we should merely pay lip service to inspiring ideals, and later do violence to simple justice, we would draw down upon us the bitter wrath of generations yet unborn." And Kofi then winced as he went on: ".... And when I

look at the murder, rape and starvation to which the people of Darfur are being subjected, I fear that we have not got far beyond “lip service”.”

There are 101 ways in which the people in this room can wince: we hardly need to remind ourselves of the multiple human rights abuses in the world in which we live – or of our sacred duty to fight them all. Only this morning do I read of the second person allegedly beaten to death in Fiji. That, ladies and gentlemen, is a ‘human rights’ issue.

But I am *not* here to point fingers and to name names. Some of *you* do that for a living, and I welcome the fact that you do. Within our own Commonwealth family, the Human Rights Initiative in Delhi plays a powerful role in this respect, and has every right to do so.

No – my role today is to dwell on our positives, and to encourage. It’s to celebrate what we have done, and to exhort us to do more, to do it better, and above all to do it together.

In doing so, I speak on behalf of a Commonwealth that is, in its way, a human rights organization.

It was in the 1991 Commonwealth Declaration that our members - whom we in the Secretariat serve - committed themselves to, I quote, the ‘principles of justice and human rights, including the rule of law and accountable administrations’. Our Heads of Government have reaffirmed this commitment, most recently at the 2005 Malta Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting, CHOGM.

It was the Commonwealth, which by its shared history and public commitment to human rights, helped to consign *apartheid* to history in South Africa. It continues to be the leading voice on serious and systematic violation of shared Commonwealth values, and the unjustifiable overthrow of democratically elected governments. Again, remember Fiji.

The Commonwealth continues to evolve. It continues to be a positive, unique and inclusive forum for the expression and achievement of common ideals and goals. It continues to give a voice and platform especially for smaller states, represented by many of you in this room.

When I first became the Secretary General, I said that human rights would be one of the cornerstones on which I would build my commitment to the Commonwealth. One of the first things I did was to set up a free-standing Human Rights Unit in the Secretariat in 2002. This was done to reflect the importance of human rights in the core programmes and policies of the organization, and also to better help our member countries to implement their human rights commitments.

So before I turn specifically to you, as the representatives of your countries' National Human Rights Institutions, I'd like to look at the wider ways in which we have done that. Here are two.

First, we stress to our member governments that human rights is not about unreasonable expectations, but about legitimate entitlements. Governments have duties with regard to human rights, and that duty can start with governments taking the simple, visible step of ratifying the two 40-year old UN Covenants which give formal expression to Social and Economic rights, and to Civil and Political rights.

These Covenants give real shape and momentum to national efforts to reduce poverty and respect human rights, and I am hopeful that those few Commonwealth countries which are yet to ratify them will soon do so. There are 20 that haven't yet done so – that's 20 too many.

Others of our members have failed to ratify the Convention on the elimination of racial discrimination, CERD; the convention on discrimination against women, CEDAW; the convention on the rights of the child, UNCROC. These are serious omissions. Yet we aim to help our member countries address them.

That help is practical. Many member countries say that they lack the knowledge and capacity to ask where the Covenants do and don't fit with their own national legislation and culture, and what they would have to do to bring them into force, and indeed to report regularly and publicly on how they have enacted them.

Last year we produced a Handbook to address those very concerns, and offered individual support to countries which needed it. Maldives, with our support, acceded to both the Covenants last September. We held a workshop on ratification last year in the Caribbean, and next month, we will be in the Pacific, in Port Moresby, to assist our member states across the region there with that same process.

Second, we give practical training on human rights – what they mean and how to apply them. Most notably in the last 18 months we have given human rights training to police forces in 19 countries, mostly in Africa and the Indian Ocean. And where we 'train trainers', as well, we have the potential to reach entire police forces – for instance the Maldives has committed to taking our training to all of its officers.

Next month we will begin a 5-day training session in Vanuatu for 10 of our Pacific Island states. Last month, I was in discussion with Jamaican Prime Minister Portia Simpson-Miller over bringing this police human rights training to her country – and perhaps beyond in the Caribbean.

The interest that this programme has generated is very encouraging – to us it demonstrates a recognition of the inevitable place of human rights in regular policing duties. I see this as a firm step towards mainstreaming of human rights in policing. We are even encouraging police departments to set up ‘human rights units’ – the Maldives Police, for instance has taken this step, and others are contemplating doing so too.

And so to you, and the National Human Rights Institutions in the Commonwealth, meeting today for the first time since Cambridge in 2000, and before that Ottawa in 1992.

In the past 20 years, a large number of our Commonwealth member countries have established institutions for the promotion of public awareness about human rights, and the protection of citizens’ rights generally. Whatever your own precise mandates, your function in acting as an independent institution in observing, educating, representing and defending the citizen, is vital to the vision we share for Commonwealth societies.

The central and critical feature of national human rights institutions is *independence*. I attach great importance to the effective functioning of these institutions and their ability to speak without fear. They are part of the way in which member countries can uphold the Commonwealth’s fundamental political values.

There are some 60 such institutions around the Commonwealth. 20 of our member countries have these bodies – several have more than one, with different organisations dealing with human rights issues, oversight of public sector and administrative decisions, or the functions of the ombudsman. Some struggle, some are badly funded – most are extremely effective.

I’m reminded of the status of the Indian NHRI, and of its bold positions in landmark cases like the Gujarat riots and several powerful instances of the rights of women and people of minority faiths. I’m reminded of the status of the Kenyan NHRI which now works alongside the Government of that country on its human rights reports to the UN Treaty bodies – partly holding them accountable, and partly working with them.

We in the Commonwealth attach great importance to NHRIs. I am particularly proud of the Best Practice Handbook which we developed after the Cambridge meeting. It’s a definitive guide to setting up NHRIs, staffing them, defining their mandates and practical roles, and ensuring that they are accountable and accessible. I attach particular importance to the guidelines on monitoring the human rights aspects of issues like conflict, race, environment, migrants and refugees, women and young people – all of which remain so precious to the Commonwealth.

In the last couple of years the Commonwealth has helped in reconstituting the Human Rights Commissions in Cameroon and the Maldives, and we're now helping to establish new ones in Swaziland and Papua New Guinea. These are long and often painstaking processes: it takes time and indeed argument to establish such national bodies. Their independence, their legal basis, the 'due process' in which they are set up and in which they operate: none of these come easily – and all are the better for that.

We will continue to work with you. We will also continue to work alongside our highly valued partner organizations in this venture – people like the UN-Office of the Human Rights Commissioner, the Asia-Pacific Forum, the Pacific Islands Forum, ECOWAS, Equitas, the Network of African NHRIs, the British Council and the NGO 'Rights and Democracy', all of whom are here today.

Human rights are too big and too important to be the preserve of one body or one organisation. It was the 1948 UN Declaration that established them as 'Universal' – indivisible – fundamental.

The Commonwealth brings many qualities to the joint endeavour of human rights, but one of the key ones is convening power. We are bound by shared principles, by history, by language, by institutions. We have seen in Ottawa and Cambridge the practical impact we can make when we meet and talk.

So in the next three days, you will have the opportunity to share notes, draw upon good practices and learn from each others' strengths and experiences.

Without attempting to pre-empt discussions on the proposed *Commonwealth Forum of NHRIs*, I would like to say that I feel there is great merit in the idea. We see this as *our* contribution to the institutional development of human rights in the Commonwealth. But whatever decision you arrive at, you can be assured of our full support and cooperation, as '*your trusted partner*'.

I welcome you again to Marlborough House, and wish you productive and successful deliberations.

It gives me great pleasure to declare this meeting open.

Thank you.

**ENDS**