

Commonwealth Conference of National Human Rights Institutions

26-28 February 2007
Marlborough House, London.

Concluding Statement

COMMONWEALTH FORUM of NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTIONS ESTABLISHED

Recognising the significant role that national human rights institutions play in promoting and protecting human rights and fundamental freedoms, the Human Rights Unit of the Commonwealth Secretariat organised a conference of national human rights institutions and other human rights related bodies in the Commonwealth such as Ombudsman institutions at the Commonwealth Secretariat, Marlborough House, London, from 26 to 28 February 2007.

The conference was officially opened by the Commonwealth Secretary General, the Rt Hon Don McKinnon. It reviewed the activities of all national human rights institutions in the Commonwealth and discussed how such institutions can be strengthened; exchanged experiences of protecting and promoting human rights in the Commonwealth and examined challenges faced by national human rights institutions; provided information on current developments concerning national human rights institutions and encouraged exchange of information among national human rights institutions throughout the Commonwealth. Delegates also discussed the *UN Principles Relating to the Status of National Institutions* (Paris Principles) as well as the Commonwealth Best Practices for National Human Rights Institutions.

The meeting brought together 44 commissioners and senior officials from the participating institutions drawn from 23 Commonwealth countries, international partner institutions including the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), Rights and Democracy Canada, Equitas, Raoul Wallenberg Institute of Human Rights, civil society organizations (the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative), as well as other regional bodies such as the Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions (APF) and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). The full list of participants is hereto appended.

Delegates shared experiences and good practices in monitoring, protecting and advocating for human rights including the use of international, regional and national systems and identified constraints and challenges faced by national human rights institutions in the Commonwealth.

The Conference reaffirmed the need for all national human rights institutions in the Commonwealth to respect and function in conformity with the Paris Principles. The strengthening of co-operation between national institutions in the Commonwealth, and between national institutions and international partners such as the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to promote and protect human rights at national level was also affirmed by the Conference.

The Conference noted with appreciation the expression of support by the Office of the UN High Commissioner of Human Rights (and other partner organisations) towards Commonwealth national human rights institutions to assist them to effectively carry out their mandates.

The Conference, in concluding its deliberations, agreed to the proposal made by the Commonwealth Secretariat Human Rights Unit for the establishment of a Commonwealth Forum of National Human Rights Institutions, the primary purpose of which would be to serve as a platform for strengthening the capacity of national human rights institutions to protect and promote human rights in the Commonwealth. The Conference agreed that the main objectives of the Forum will include:

- promoting increased access, dialogue and interaction with Commonwealth Heads of Government especially during their meetings (CHOGM);
- promoting interaction and dialogue among NHRIs, and with regional bodies and members of civil society, at and within other NHRI gatherings and the UN human rights mechanisms;
- allowing for collective expressions of support, encouragement or concern in relation to particular events and developments in individual Commonwealth NHRIs for the better defense and promotion of human rights.

The Conference further agreed to set up a Steering Committee to make recommendations in relation to these objectives and to the modalities of establishing the Forum, so as to define its structure, mandate, and scope of activity.

The Conference expressed appreciation to the Commonwealth Secretariat for its hospitality and support throughout the course of the conference, and commended the initiative by the Human Rights Unit in organising the conference and facilitating the establishment of the Forum.

Dated this 28th day of February 2007 at Marlborough House, London