

Commonwealth Conference of National Human Rights Institutions

Marlborough House, 26-28 February 2007

Closing Remarks by Deputy Secretary General the Hon Mr Ransford Smith

Madame Chair, Chairperson of the Uganda Human Rights Commission;
Respective Chairpersons and Representatives of human rights institutions from around the Commonwealth, including Ombudsmen;
Mr Gianni Magazzeni, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights;
Ladies and Gentlemen. I acknowledge Mr Jean-Louis Roy of Rights and Democracy, Canada, which has contributed to the conduct of this meeting.

I have been invited to close this conference of national human rights institutions in the Commonwealth. I am very happy to do so. I trust that you have had a productive and useful meeting here in Marlborough House.

I have read the strongly supportive statement made by the Secretary General in his opening on Monday, and of course Deputy Secretary General Mugasha spoke to the gathering on Monday night and again expressed the Secretariat's support to this meeting, to independent human rights commissions, and indeed to you yourselves in the roles that you fulfil in your countries.

To these I would add my own support, and wished to now offer you a few words of encouragement in taking forward the decisions and deliberations of the last three days.

A strong hallmark of the Commonwealth is the way in which it has acted, and continues to act, as an umbrella organisation, a forum for the expression and sharing of experiences. This takes place on a basis of equality and mutual respect, against a backdrop of principle and certain fundamental common values. So it is that I have no doubt that a useful legacy of this week has been sharing – in the formal sessions and in the social sessions – the problems and possibilities of national institutions in Commonwealth countries.

I wished to add that in particular, it is a feature of our Commonwealth family that its forums provide space for smaller states, including small island states, at an international and multilateral level. I am pleased to note from the list of participants that the Human Rights Unit has ensured the attendance of Ombudsmen from the Caribbean Commonwealth, from Namibia and from Papua New Guinea, as well as representatives of small states with national commissions, such as Maldives and Mauritius. I have learned with interest of the research of the New Zealand HR Commission into appropriate models of viable national mechanisms for small island states, consistent with the realities of these settings. This sort of cooperation and sharing is in the best traditions of this organisation.

This Secretariat and its Human Rights Unit exists to serve and assist your institutions to pursue their mandates at the national level, and to facilitate peer networking, while offering the possibility of a collective voice at the regional and international level.

[...I understand that there has been in principle agreement surrounding a Commonwealth Forum of National Human Rights Institutions, which will principally provide a platform for your institutions in relation to strategic engagement with CHOGM. This is a considerable advance in raising the profile of human rights values in the Commonwealth....]

We encourage you to take up the services and assistance offered by our Secretariat. Tell your governments about HRU and their work. I encourage you to seek opportunities to coordinate the work of ministries and civil society in your countries, and to work together with the Secretariat in taking forward national plans for the promotion of human rights.

I trust that you will return renewed and stimulated by the discussions, reflection and introductions of the last three days. Yours is a most important and responsible role in serving your societies. I wish you all a safe journey home.

Thank you.