



Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting 2009

Secretary-General's Media Briefing

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Opening Remarks

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Commonwealth Secretary-General

Introduction

I am very touched when so much effort is made to be present at the Secretary-General's press conference because I make an effort always to get the word out about this institution, particularly now that we are going to have the CHOGM. You may be wondering about the format that we have used today. The idea was to try and make it a bit more intimate than last time.

May I welcome you here? I am flanked by Deputy Secretary-General Ransford Smith and Eduardo del Buey, whom many of you know. This is primarily about the CHOGM, so I will get straight into what I think are likely to be the preoccupations of our leaders there.

All our leaders' experiences in the past have been that nothing can be programmed or predicted very precisely about what would be discussed. They come with their own thoughts and their own sense of how this opportunity for them to be together can be utilised. At the same time, I think some trends are bound to figure in the conversations. I would like to mention what I think these are likely to be.

Economic crisis

The first circumstance in the global context is the economic crisis and the various other kinds of pressures under which small and vulnerable states find themselves. Over the last two years we have gone through an energy crisis, a food-security crisis and now a financial crisis. The questions on the minds of our leaders are in keeping with the tradition of the Commonwealth to support and speak up on behalf of small and vulnerable members and economies about what they feel needs to be done now.

There has been a meeting of the finance ministers recently in Cyprus. They were also concerned with the same issue. One of the developments that they noted was the fact that the G20 had come into existence. There are five members in the G20 from the Commonwealth, and therefore this provides greater participation in the G20 by the Commonwealth and offers a very important opportunity to transmit many of these Commonwealth messages. In fact, one of the decisions taken was that in future to enable this to become more effective the finance ministers would themselves meet at the IMF/World Bank meeting.

I think it can be said that over this year and part of last year the Commonwealth has succeeded in making an impression on the terms of debate by projecting the importance of the ideas of inclusiveness, collectivity and equity. Ever since the Marlborough House Statement in June last year I have also been writing in some instances to all members of the G20 – not just the G5, and certainly to the five members of the Commonwealth – that these perspectives should be made to bear. I expect that discussion will take place in CHOGM Port of Spain on what innovative work could be done to answer the situation of small and vulnerable states.

Global warming

The other issue, which is of course inevitable, is global warming, if for no other reason than a week or 10 days later we are going to have the Copenhagen Summit. We cannot pre-negotiate Copenhagen there, but it is inevitable that this will be a very important topic for discussion among the leaders there. I expect a reiteration to emerge of a very strong sense of advocacy of the case for the small and vulnerable states of the world. The ones most starkly affected in many instances in an existential sense by global warming are the many small and vulnerable states that have negligible carbon footprints.

As in the case of the financial crisis, where, when people talk about green shoots being visible here and there, the green shoots are either in industrial or emerging economies, but not in the poorer economies that have been most directly affected, similarly in the field of environment, while no contribution to the crisis has been made by these countries, they are the ones who are the most direly affected. I expect that in international environmental governance it will be very strongly emphasised that the architecture must take into account on a priority basis the needs of these economies. Together with this is the technological and financial requirement that must be made available in such cases for the environmental adaptation need of these countries.

I expect there will be a reiteration of the Lake Victoria Plan of Action on the environment, which was approved last year in all its elements, which include support in international negotiations in the way we give in the trade sector. In other words, I call it 'environmental good offices,' strengthening the environmental good offices of the Commonwealth in the six areas that were mentioned in the Lake Victoria Plan.

I also hope for a further agreement in terms of capacity-building of these states that we may also engage ourselves where there is a desire to engage with the Commonwealth in helping them realise national plans in terms of options and technologies, i.e. where they can access it, how they can go about it, what the sources of finance are that could be made available according to where they are. Each country is in a different place in the field of environment.

Electoral management

There is a third area I see as inevitably coming up – tied partly to the fact this is the 60th anniversary of the modern Commonwealth – which is a recapitulation of what this organisation has done in the rule of law, democratic governments, constitutionalism and how this work can be further advanced. One of the ideas that are right now before the leaders for consideration is a proposal for the creation of a network of electoral management bodies owing to the recognition that this is a pivotal organisation and institution for the functioning of democracy and for the trust that people have in it. The idea is that this would be a peer group that would form its own way of functioning using best practices, learning from each other's experience, a high level of standard-setting and benchmarking, which they would do for themselves, and progressively to become stronger and stronger in order to win and keep the trust of the people because of the integrity, efficiency and delivery.

Serving a new generation

A fourth item that will be before the leaders pertains to the youth. Our motto is, 'Serving a new generation.' We have a very old youth programme. It started in 1974 and it has considerable accomplishments to its name. I read just this morning that since 1995 we have run an impressive youth credit initiative, which has piloted in 14 countries; 20,000 have been trained and 2,500 businesses have been started in the last two years alone. We have a tremendous record in giving youth both worker diplomas and mainstreaming in government policies to ourselves.

In my many interactions with leaders it has been emphasised that this work needs to be strengthened further in recognition of the changing demography of most of our member states. We are getting older as an organisation and member states are getting younger in terms of the youth under 25 and under 20. In the end, the task of nation-building and of overcoming the many challenges that all our societies have will be entrusted to the youth. One of the areas that we want to consolidate our contribution in is around the idea that we prepare a very rich and comprehensive resource cumulatively, which will be replenished and will cover the data, best thinking and best practices on the subject of everything that pertains to the mainstreaming of youth in national policy.

Therefore, while there are many sites, this would be a more programmed one, in order to be of direct assistance to national policy-makers in the way it is designed and formatted, and the way it presents information. I will keep all the fresh thinking on youth matters up to date. I think this would be a huge Commonwealth contribution if this can be approved.

Specifically speaking, our feeling is that youth enterprise, and vocation and skills development, is the direction that we should particularly go into and I am very glad that, as a result of all the activism that we have been engaged in, there are already two banks in Asia and in Africa that have earmarked a significant amount of money for youth enterprise and a completely new orientation towards judging projects, mentoring, nurturing and evaluating them in order to encourage such enterprise. The youth sector will be a very, very central one.

Rwanda

As far as the Commonwealth and its membership is concerned, I think many of you would perhaps be knowing that there is a formal application from Rwanda. It has been processed according to the committee that was set up in order to process applications by new members. Formal application, which is the third stage, has been received from Rwanda and it will be before the leaders for consideration. I thought I might stop here. I would be very happy to ask the Deputy Secretary-General if he would like to add anything. If not, we can proceed with the questions.

Q&A

Deputy Secretary-General Ransford Smith: Thank you, Secretary-General. I think you have covered the waterfront in terms of the main issues that will arise at the CHOGM. One other element might be the fact that it will also be taking place directly before a ministerial meeting in Geneva with regards to the Doha Round and heads might also wish to give some impetus to that particular process given its importance to growth and development.

Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma: There is one omission. This is about the theme of the CHOGM itself. It is a partnering for more sustainable and equitable future. One aspect of partnership, which is the collective one I have already mentioned, is the format of the G5 and the G20, and the work they can do in solidarity with the rest of the members. The argument that I had made in some of the op-eds that I have written was that the G20 has 90% of the world's GDP, but 90% of the world's countries are out of it. What can they say that is relevant and of interest to those that are out? In other words, whether G20 or T20 (that is the Group of 20 or Trustees 20), they carry a lot of responsibility. That is the collective part of partnership.

However, there will also be a proposal before the leaders concerning the design of a partnership portal, which will be a vehicle. It will be a web-based tool for innovative partnerships and governance in that several windows can be progressively created, which will enable the many potential partners to be able to interact and contact each other directly, and which would be serving the needs of information and interactiveness. It will have a transactional dimension. This is harnessing the technology now available, as well as a variety of partners that have now arisen in the world by means of this vehicle. It will be presented before the leaders to be approved in the sense that they are convinced by the idea and its usefulness, and we may proceed now with progressive operationalisation of it. Thank you.

Adrian Croft (Reuters): I have two questions. Does what you are saying about Rwanda mean that a final decision on admitting Rwanda could be taken at the CHOGM, or are their further steps required? Secondly, what is your view of the tax on financial transactions that was raised again by Gordon Brown at the G20? If such a tax were approved, where should the proceeds go?

Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma: Thank you. On Rwanda, yes, that would be the final stage. The first stage is a show of interest by an applicant country, informally. The second is a determination by the Secretariat concerning what they see of the values, principles, direction in which public policy is taking them, advising member states of them, and asking them whether they would like the member state to proceed with a formal application, on the evidence that has been given. This was done and it was indicated that the formal application could now follow, which would now be considered in the CHOGM. That will be the final one.

As for your question about financing, we have a very strong interest in the exploration of all innovative ways of securing additional finance. Some of the principles have been accepted, which is that the richer countries bear greater responsibility towards the development of such financing mechanisms in order to address the acute situation of the poorer countries. I notice from the contribution made in St Andrews, there were different opinions concerning it. Some of

it is contradictory. In one sense, yesterday, there was a report that the IMF had been asked to prepare a report on this idea and furnish it by April. This morning I read that Strauss-Kahn has said that this is not an idea whose time has come. He seems to have suggested that, at the time, perhaps he will not be pursuing this. This morning I also see that this is now presented as an idea to be considered not necessarily as an idea to be very severely advocated and pursued. However, I welcome the fact that there is thinking out of the box on how financing can be secured, even if some ideas look more workable than some others. In this respect, the position of the Prime Minister of the UK has been very clear and consistent for a very long period of time. In fact, it was he who chaired the mini-summit in June last year leading to the Marlborough House declaration on the subject.

Question (Westside Radio): In terms of your expression of the reforms of electoral rules and regulations, is there any draft ready in the CHOGM that is yet to be signed and agreed at the end of this summit in order to take the decisions of electoral reforms in the different Commonwealth countries, which seems to be a greater problem for emerging democracies in today's time and age?

Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma: There is no draft. There is a steering group of elected members, who have made this recommendation on behalf of their peers to the leaders. Once this idea is endorsed by other leaders, then a plenary meeting of all election commissioners of the Commonwealth will take place and they will give themselves the terms of reference, rules of procedure and how they wish to proceed. This is a very important consideration, because in the end the significance of the exercise is what the election commissioners are doing among themselves, and not what any government is asking them to do, because of the autonomy and independence that they must enjoy.

Raymond Lloyd (The Parity Democrat): I have two questions. *La francophonie*, the intergovernmental French language association, which is referred to in Action 49 of your new booklet, has four Arab countries among its 56 members: Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia. There are at least that number of Arab countries that were subject to the English language and to British advances in the rule of law. What steps are you taking to have one or more Arab countries attaining at least observer status with the Commonwealth? My second question is: what measures will be taken at the CHOGM in Port of Spain short of suspension of membership to encourage the government of Sri Lanka to release the tens of thousands of Tamil citizens still held in army camps, not least because the CHOGM coincides with the annual Tamil remembrance day on 27th November 2009.

Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma: As far as the question of membership is concerned, what constitutes the case that can be made for membership is clear from the report that has been released. Any Arab country, if it feels it can meet the guidelines of that report, is free to apply for membership. The procedure thereafter will be followed as in the case of Rwanda.

As for Sri Lanka, as far as our engagement with Sri Lanka is concerned, it follows the guidelines given to us, which is to convey to them the various concerns that are remitted to us in the Commonwealth, according to the Millbrook Plan of Action. This is what we have been doing. To

convey our concern at the time the humanitarian situation arose, three or four statements have been issued by me.

James Robbins (BBC): You have talked about the proximity of this CHOGM and the Copenhagen process. Do you think that gives you a really unusual opportunity to try to influence the outcome in Copenhagen for the better? In other words, my question is: what is the minimum required of the Commonwealth to increase the chances of a successful outcome in Copenhagen, given the fact that we seem to be watching a process of drift and delay towards a framework, rather than a numbers-based comprehensive agreement? As a subset to that, is it actually any easier to reconcile the developed and developing world within the Commonwealth on these issues, than it is to reconcile them within the UN system as a whole?

Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma: There is considerable interest in this CHOGM, because this is the last summit of a body of this size and this representativeness before Copenhagen. I have been in touch with the chair, and it is also his intention to see that the debates try to strive towards as high a level of ambition as can be attained. It is of course, as I have said in my opening remarks, not going to be a venue where we can pre-negotiate what has been anticipated in Copenhagen, but as you quite rightly say, people are already talking about Copenhagen as a staging post to the next meeting in New Mexico, and so on. At every staging post, it is our expectation that in terms of the level of commitment, collectivity and concern, the practical instruments that are becoming available, and the voices of the poor and the vulnerable being heard, all of this will be lifted higher than was the case before any conference.

I certainly hope that in Port of Spain, this would be the case, and a Commonwealth contribution will become available. I think that our contribution should certainly be in keeping with the advocacy, which we have always done, that all outcomes are meaningful to the extent that they embrace all participants within the world community, that environmental solutions are important solutions for everybody, with particular reference to those who are suffering the ravages of global warming the most, and have the least cushioning, both financial and technologically, to be able to meet it. I hope that this particular Commonwealth perspective, both in terms of advocacy of this situation in international environmental governance, as well as the creation of instruments which would be of urgent assistance to these bodies, can be made.

Question (PTA): Number one: I would some more details about the network of electoral management bodies that you have spoken about. Number two: you have spoken earlier about a fund to help small nations. What is the status of the fund right now?

Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma: It is for the election commissioners themselves to decide on matters such as the following. In every election, how will they be represented? How will the observations be mainstreamed into the whole group and treated? What is the menu of best practices and its opposite which would be developed, which would be advantageous to everybody? In all the three sectors of electioneering, which is pre-election, and which is preparation of voters' lists, for instance? There is the demarcation of boundaries and that process. How level a playing field is it between political parties? How level a playing field is it

as far as access to media and their own ability to present their case is concerned? During the election itself, what are the healthiest procedures? Do you have the outcome posted and made public in the booth where the counting is done, or in a central place? Who is present when the counting is done? Are the boxes transparent or not?

There is a list of good practices that have arisen. Most importantly, immediately after the election, is the degree of insulation and confidence and security that must be enjoyed by the election commission to be able to bring it to a rightful conclusion. How to proceed on all of these items is entirely up to them. What I am certain of is that this exercise will bring enormous advantage to the already very high reputation which election observation by the Commonwealth enjoys all over the world. I would mention only one example, which was in Ghana, where a peaceful result was forthcoming, despite the fact that the difference in vote was about 30,000 or so. It has been openly acknowledged by the government of Ghana that the presence of an observer, their contribution and the things they said was enormously in getting this outcome. So, I think this process is a win both domestically, in all our member states, as well as institutionally for us.

I am not sure about your reference to the fund. I may have made a reference in a particular context, but unless you remind me of the context in which I would have made the reference, I would find it hard to recall what you meant by it.

Question (PTA): Soon after you took over as the Secretary-General, you suggested that the Commonwealth plans to have a fund so that in times of crisis and emergencies, smaller nations –

Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma: I understand, thank you. This is point number five in the Lake Victoria Plan of Action on the environment. This is insurance against natural devastation and catastrophe, and what the Commonwealth is able to do. We have a Commonwealth Disaster Management Agency, and that organisation, together with the bank, has been very active, in fact, in developing a product which already exists, the virtue of which is that depending on the amount you want to insure yourself for, and depending upon the strength – let us say the typhoon strength or the storm strength – the payment is made very quickly and without any questions asked concerning an audit of damage or anything like that. In other words, it gives real financial protection to the states concerned.

I should add that this is one product among many that exist, but it has many features that I understand are very attractive compared to the others. This is fresh in the mind of the Deputy Secretary-General, and he has been discussing this in Uganda just now, and I think he came back yesterday. I will ask him to comment on this as well.

Deputy Secretary-General Ransford Smith: Thank you, Secretary-General. I think the reference is to a disaster relief fund that the Commonwealth Disaster Management Agency has been working on in conjunction with a private bank, and essentially as you have indicated it would provide assistance in times of disaster to developing countries. I think the defining elements would be the speed of disbursement that would occur. Quite often when disasters happen, it takes some time for the assessments to be done subsequent to the disaster in terms

of the level of damage and the payouts that would be required. In this case, there would be pre-agreed trigger levels, or what is called the parametric approach to providing assistance after a disaster, and it would be expected that funding would be paid out very quickly. That I think would be the defining element. As the Secretary-General has indicated, this is one of a number of initiatives that are being taken in this area, including also by the World Bank.

Robert Hardman (Daily Mail): Just going back to these election commissions: you have already got your observer groups. What are these commissions going to do that the observer groups cannot already do, and who is going to appoint the commissioners? Who is going to decide where they go?

Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma: What the commissioners would be doing among themselves would be observing elections to strengthen their own work inside their own country, and at first hand, learning a lesson which can be digested by them and internalised to improve their own working. As far as election observation is concerned, we send teams that actually prepare a report on what they saw: the weaknesses, the strengths, and the credibility issues. That is an exercise we do at the request of a member state, and that is an institutional exercise done by the Secretariat. What the election commissioners would be doing is an exercise among themselves in which if they want the help of the Secretariat, it will be forthcoming, but otherwise will be an autonomous field of activity in order to strengthen the benchmarking and quality standards in the work they do in every possible way, so that they can serve the people better, and to insulate themselves from domestic political vicissitudes.

Robert Hardman (Daily Mail): Will they be appointed by their own country?

Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma: If this is approved by the leaders, a venue will be identified when a meeting of all election commissioners of the Commonwealth will be called, and they will give themselves their terms of reference in the way they work. As for the appointment of the election commissioners, they would already have been appointed by the national government. They would be the head of the election management bodies, and in that capacity they would be coming. They would not need to be appointed by this new group. They would be appointed in the constitutional ways that exist in every individual member country. They would be participating in that capacity.

Robert Hardman (Daily Mail): Would you have two separate bodies observing elections? Also, the independence of electoral commissioners in some Commonwealth countries sometimes leaves something to be desired. Is this a means by which they can be reinforced in their independence?

Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma: The Commonwealth Secretariat would not be involved in the work of this peer group, which will be the network of the election management bodies. They would be doing the work themselves to strengthen their own position in the work that they do. If they want any technical support from the Secretariat, they can always ask us, and we would be very happy to give it to them, but it will not at all impact on the observation, which we do at request. For instance, they may be present working in this way in a member

state, but we may not be invited by that member state to observe that election. So, I think we will be able to keep it quite separate.

Robert Hardman (Daily Mail): Regarding the membership of this group, is it only government appointed electoral commissioners, or will there be any civil society component in it at all?

Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma: The membership will be the election commissioners themselves. What interface they would like with civil society is entirely up to them. You were right in mentioning that the functioning of election commissions all over the Commonwealth is very uneven. That is the reason why we feel it to be very useful if this peer group came into existence and lifted the act for everybody.

Question (Afromedia): Regarding agenda three, you mentioned about the position of the Commonwealth in the present and the future. It is indeed a great year for the Commonwealth as we celebrate sixty years of our formation. My question is: how are we going to advance this body forward, this great Commonwealth? Where do we see ourselves in the next sixty years?

If I may say, as a young person, considering the fact that the UK is actually more in coalition with the European Union, by virtue of the European Communities Act 1972. As a Commonwealth citizen, I feel terribly neglected because of this second marriage which has overruled our first marriage, the Commonwealth. We share a very common ancestry and I feel that this has actually been overridden by the Maastricht Treaty. Where do we see ourselves in regards to moving this body forwards, in terms of a political, economic and social body that will encompass all the rich needs of the Commonwealth with regards to that?

Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma: Thank you very much. I would be very happy if I could answer that question for the next six years, let alone the next 60. I have no doubt in my mind, and this is something I have said. The words just escaped me, I had not planned the phrase. I was just thrown into a press conference as soon as I was elected, and I said this is a great global good and I am honoured to serve it. That is exactly what the Commonwealth has been throughout its history.

It has several very important features which are extremely contemporary. Firstly, it has always been an organisation of its times. In my view, it created the idea of an international community when it met in 1949, seven leaders stepping into the new world with no agenda except a recognition that the world has changed dramatically and a response was needed. The heavy lifting it did in the period of apartheid, decolonising, the standard setting it has done in creating a values-based global polity is extraordinary. The speed with which it moved after the Cold War and created the Harare Principles, which have radiated their influence in the Biketawa Declaration in the Pacific, in the Caribbean, in the Nepad, in the peer-review mechanism in Africa, has been quite extraordinary. The contribution which the Commonwealth has made to the idea that sustainability is more than politics and economics, but a system of values by which you agree to live and which are irreducible. I think that if, in the 21st century, we are going to see a stable global order, it will be because of the global ideas of this type. It

produced a debt overhang idea, which is HIPC, which became a global idea, on health worker protocols, education worker protocols and many other accomplishments to its name.

So, to answer your question, the first thing we have to do, and which is already being done, but which we have to reinforce, is to respect ourselves as a tipping-point organisation; in other words, an organisation with modest financial means but unlimited intellectual capital, which is capable of generating and introducing ideas, whose time has come. The second great idea of the Commonwealth, which is a very contemporary one and increasingly being recognised, is that salvation is not partial in the world but can only be collective, and it is because of our membership and the variety in it, and the respect which is accorded to every person equally as a leader, irrespective of the size of the country or the economy they may be leading, is a model for this solidarity and this collectivity.

I feel that in the time to come we can also forge strategic partnerships because of the credibility we have in many areas of work, and find partners who will work with us so that the scope and ambit of our work is enlarged as well. I think this is an organisation which can mainstream itself as one of the organisations which is contributing to the globalisation of wisdom, which is the greatest contemporary requirement. Everything in the world is being rapidly globalised; it would be very helpful if we had perspectives on the world which promote the idea of real sustainable welfare for everybody, and the entire thing is a wisdom function that we can exercise.

However, you are right: there is an issue here, which is that a lot of our work is done in a way in which it is not self-congratulatory. I will give you one example, which is the example of the Maldives: from a one-party state, we have worked with them, we have walked the walked with the Maldives and now it is a multi-party democracy, and it could only be done quietly. If you look at so many of our accomplishments in so many places, it is all a work in progress at all times. One of the reasons we have a reservoir of trust with our member states is because we do not indulge in megaphone diplomacy. Therefore, this is a price we would happily be prepared to play, but at the same time, there is also no doubt that as far as protection, outreach and getting the word out is concerned, we have to do a much better job than we have been doing hitherto. I think next year we will see, I hope (and you are all from the media or the press), a change in this regard.

Question (Associated Press of Pakistan): Can the Commonwealth play any role in helping to resume the dialogue process between Pakistan and India? Secondly, can you confirm whether the Pakistani Prime Minister will be attending this CHOGM? Thank you.

Secretary-General Kamallesh Sharma: The Secretary-General is engaged in good offices which are almost entirely of an internal political nature in its member states. I cannot offhand recall, except for the contribution we have made in the decolonisation process, and thereto in a very general sense, in Africa, where a role of mediation was played by the Secretary-General. I think the Secretary-General, the Secretariat and the means they have at their command should concentrate on that which we do well, and which is exercising good offices and advancing the internal governance paradigms, the rule of law and democratic constitutionalism in member

states. I see very little advantage in the Secretary-General engaging himself or herself in issues that are resolved between parties themselves and in which the Commonwealth good offices themselves bring no advantage. As for the participation at the level at which it will be demonstrated in the CHOGM, I have the answer to your question, but I am not sure whether I am free to make it public, and I would much rather that this announcement is made from Islamabad itself.

Eduardo del Buey: Thank you very much, ladies and gentlemen. It has been a pleasure having you here this morning and we hope to see many of your happy faces at the CHOGM in Trinidad in two weeks' time. Thank you, Secretary-General and Deputy Secretary-General and thank you all for coming.

Secretary-General Kamalesh Sharma: I should draw your attention to our biennial report. I think I see that some of you have copies, but please do read it when you have some time. Thank you.