

## **Commonwealth Forum of National Human Rights Institutions**

### **Formal opening Statement by Deputy Commonwealth Secretary General, Mrs Masire-Mwamba**

**Crown Plaza Hotel, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago  
23 and 24 November 2009**

- It gives me great pleasure to be invited to open this meeting of the Commonwealth Forum of National Human Rights Institutions. I must at the very outset thank the local authorities here for making such wonderful arrangements for our participants to engage meaningfully. My sincere thanks go to the Ombudsman of Trinidad and Tobago and her staff for having facilitated this meeting and supported its organisation.
- I have been informed that you have a very interesting agenda and programme of work in front of you and that you have robust and interactive sessions waiting for you throughout the next two days.
- It is also pleasing to note that delegates have come from all across the Commonwealth, in possibly the largest gathering ever as a group of Commonwealth National Human Rights Institutions. This is a good sign. It symbolises the great importance and confidence you all attach to the Forum, which, you established two years ago.
- We in the Commonwealth Secretariat attach great importance to the work of National Human Rights Institutions. That is why we continue to support, strengthen and work with you in promoting human rights in the Commonwealth. We see the Commonwealth Forum of National Human Rights Institutions as giving concrete expression to our shared values of freedom and respect for human rights. We will continue to be involved in a range of advisory and capacity building activities with these institutions as well as with governments seeking to establish one.
- Allow me to emphasise that National Human Rights Institutions have a vital role to play, as independent national authority on human rights, in promoting public awareness about human rights and protection of citizens' rights. This role is increasingly getting recognized in our member states as evidenced by an increased number of these institutions in the Commonwealth. For example, we have seen the establishment of Bangladesh Human Rights Commission and Swaziland Human Rights Commission in the past 18 months.

We welcome these developments, commit our support and are encouraged that some countries are also in the process of setting up their own institutions.

- National Human Rights Institutions are also in a unique position – as they are widely regarded, on the one hand, as trusted and fair arbitrators by the people and human rights organizations, and on the other, sharing that same trust and partnership with the governments.
- A relationship of trust and the effectiveness of the national human rights institutions are in fact judged to a great extent by their independence and objectivity.
- This Forum is also the appropriate platform for the sharing of best practices and can contribute significantly to a learning process among the Members whereby the practices in one country are emulated and implemented for the common good of our citizens and for capacity building and institutional strengthening.
- I see that among other things the Forum aims at coordinating and allowing for collective and consensus-based expressions of support, encouragement or concern, in relation to particular events and developments affecting member institutions for the better defence and promotion of human rights. It was encouraging to see the Forum coming together and supporting the Kenya National Commission when it was in trouble following the 2007 post election violence.
- Your coming together as a Forum is, therefore, of great significance in terms of facilitating, networking and building partnerships for capacity building between national human rights institutions in the commonwealth. It also enables countries working towards a national institution or strengthening it to draw on the experience of fully established institutions.
- There is great hope that a forum, premised on the commitment to political and human rights, with which the Commonwealth is widely associated, will also provide a platform for joint advocacy and for increased interaction between Commonwealth national human rights institutions, governments, civil society organisations, and international bodies, including at events such as CHOGM.
- You, therefore, have a significant role to play in ensuring that national institutions take key international instruments such as the Paris Principles seriously. They should also be encouraged to support the process towards establishment of Paris Principles-compliant National Human Rights Institutions in Commonwealth member countries.
- Another role for you is in acting as a bridge to promote increased interaction with Commonwealth leaders principally through the CHOGM process.

I know that you have comprehensively discussed how best the Forum can do this. We are keen to engage you on the outcome of your deliberations.

- As you are all aware, the hallmark of the Commonwealth approach in promoting human rights is the way in which it continues to act, as an umbrella organisation and a platform for sharing of experiences.
- We appreciate the difficult placement of NHRI's as Government appointed and funded Commissions. Who at the same time have the mandate to champion the rights of the people.
- The growing complexity of challenges as evidenced by the recent climate change issues is an additional challenge to the NHRI. This calls for new appreciation and understanding of a broader range of issues than the traditional scope covered by Human Rights
- As we move towards the Copenhagen Summit later this year, we must ensure that our voices are heard and that the Human Rights dimension of the climate change challenges are taken on board and recognised by leaders.
- I sincerely hope that, we shall have the opportunity at this meeting to share experiences and learn lessons from each other, discuss challenges, possibilities, and most importantly to chart out a future course of the Forum, will go a long way in strengthening pan-Commonwealth cooperation and network in advancing human rights in the Commonwealth.
- Let me thank the outgoing Chair of the Forum, the Uganda Human Rights Commission for their dedication and commitment to the work of the Forum. I have no doubt that the new Chair will benefit from the work that Uganda Human Rights Commission as the first chair of the Commonwealth Forum of National Human Rights Institutions.
- I declare this meeting officially open.