

# Commonwealth Forum of National Human Rights Institutions Steering Committee Meeting

Marlborough House, London, 21 - 22 May 2007

As mandated by the Commonwealth Conference of National Human Rights Institutions held in London in February 2007, the Steering Committee met at the Commonwealth Secretariat, London from 21 to 22 May 2007. The Committee discussed specific issues and modalities of establishing the Commonwealth Forum of National Human Rights Institutions (CF-NHRI). The meeting was convened by the Human Rights Unit, Commonwealth Secretariat (HRU), in its capacity as facilitator of the Steering Committee, and was attended by Committee members, Ms. Rosslyn Noonan (New Zealand), Mr. David Langtry (Canada), and Mr. Joel M. Omara (Uganda). The other member (Indian Human Rights Commission) was unable to attend but submitted written comments. The Steering Committee welcomed the participation at its meeting of Mr Gianni Magazzeni (Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights-OHCHR).

The Committee had before it a 'Working Paper' prepared by HRU, and written comments received from Commonwealth national human rights institutions (C-NHRIs) and others represented at the February meeting. In addition, the Steering Committee also took note of a compilation of the views expressed on the Forum at the February meeting and the report of the C-NHRI meeting held on the margins of the ICC meeting in Geneva in March.

The Steering Committee recommends the following to the Commonwealth Forum of NHRIs on issues related to the principles guiding the Forum, its objectives, organizational structure, membership and the way forward:

## **1. Mandate and scope of the Forum**

The Commonwealth Forum of NHRIs is intended to be an informal and inclusive body of Commonwealth NHRIs and other national accountability mechanisms having a human rights mandate, to support the broad objectives of promoting networking, sharing of information, experiences and best practices, encouraging countries to establish *Paris Principles*-compliant NHRIs, and assisting national institutions to fulfill their mandated activities. The Forum is intended to complement and support, and not to duplicate, the activities of ICC, OHCHR, and other existing regional coordinating or accreditation bodies.

## **2. Principles of the Forum**

The Forum will operate within the context of the following general principles, which inform its objectives:

- “Inclusiveness”: The Forum is intended to be an ‘inclusive’ body of Commonwealth NHRIs and other national accountability mechanisms with a human rights mandate.
- “Complementarity and non-duplication”: The Forum is based on the principle of offering complementarity and support to existing national, regional and international bodies, systems and processes and intends to carry out its activities on the principle of non-duplication.
- “Strategic”: The Forum will be strategic and focused in its approach and will seek to identify its comparative advantages (in keeping with the above principle of complementarity). In terms of sharing expertise, information and best practice, the Forum will facilitate and maintain a ‘two way’ mutually supportive relationship with and between the Commonwealth Secretariat and Commonwealth NHRIs, as well as member governments for the promotion and protection of human rights in the Commonwealth.

It is envisaged that the Forum will progressively evolve in furthering its objectives.

### **3. Objectives of the Forum**

- To be an inclusive forum for networking and sharing of experiences, information, knowledge and ‘best practices’ among C-NHRIs;
- To promote and facilitate strategic partnership and linkages between C-NHRIs themselves and between C-NHRIs and other regional and international bodies dealing with NHRIs;
- To support the development and promotion of compliance with the *Paris Principles* taking into account the ICC accreditation process, including through encouraging and supporting the process towards establishment of *Paris Principles*-compliant NHRIs in Commonwealth member countries;
- To coordinate and allow for collective (consensus-based) expressions of support, encouragement or concern, in relation to particular events and developments affecting C-NHRIs individually or collectively, for the better defence and promotion of human rights;
- To promote increased interaction with Commonwealth Heads of Government, principally through the CHOGM process;
- To complement and support the work of HRU in promoting human rights in the Commonwealth.

#### 4. Membership

In keeping with the general principle of 'inclusiveness', while also recognizing the *Paris Principles* and the Commonwealth Best Practices for NHRIs, membership of the Forum will be as follows:<sup>1</sup>

- Members: Commonwealth NHRIs with ICC category 'A' status;
- Associate Members: Other C-NHRIs, including those under ICC category 'B' and 'C' and other national accountability mechanisms with a human rights mandate (such as Offices of the Ombudsman, Public Defender's Office, etc).

International and regional coordinating bodies, including ICC and OHCHR, as well as interested civil society organizations may be invited to attend Forum meetings as 'Observers'.

#### 5. Organisational Structure

The Human Rights Unit of the Commonwealth Secretariat will function as the 'Coordinator' of the Forum, and there will be no standing Secretariat as such.

The host country NHRI (hosting the CHOGM) will be appointed as the 'Chair' of the Forum and will carry out that responsibility until the next CHOGM. The Chair must be a Member of the Forum, i.e. an NHRI which enjoys category 'A' status under ICC accreditation.

The Chair-designate, i.e. the NHRI of the country which will host the next CHOGM will be identified at the current CHOGM. In the event the host country does not have an NHRI or an NHRI which is ICC category 'A' compliant, an eligible NHRI from that region will be designated as the Chair. In those instances where there exists a host NHRI which does not qualify as the Chair, it shall co-host the meeting of the Forum at that CHOGM with the alternatively designated Chair.

HRU in consultation with the Chair will coordinate the activities of the Forum including in planning and arranging its meetings. The Forum may periodically meet, as appropriate, in the wings of other gatherings such as the Human Rights Council, ICC, etc.

In order for HRU to effectively carry out its responsibility of 'Coordinator' of the Forum, it is important to strengthen its capacity and resources. The Forum will lobby collectively as well as with respective member governments to increase support and resources to HRU.

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<sup>1</sup> In determining its membership, the Forum recognizes the ICC accreditation and membership status.

## **6. Way Forward: First Meeting of the Forum in Kampala (CHOGM, November 2007)**

In its capacity as Coordinator of the Forum, HRU will support the efforts of the Uganda Human Rights Commission in organising the first meeting of the Forum to be held on 20 November 2007. In this regard, HRU will explore funds to facilitate the participation of a limited number of NHRIs primarily from the smaller states in the Commonwealth.

The Kampala Meeting will be jointly hosted by Uganda HRC and HRU, and accordingly the invitation for the meeting will go under the joint signature of the Chair of Uganda HRC and Head of Human Rights, Commonwealth Secretariat. In order to ensure maximum participation of national institutions at the Kampala meeting, efforts will be made by HRU/Commonwealth Secretariat, Uganda HRC (as the host) as well as all other C-NHRIs to encourage member governments to support the participation of their national institutions, including as appropriate, through their inclusion in the national delegations.

In order to mobilize political support for the Forum, NHRIs are encouraged to lobby with their governments to include strong support for the Forum and its work in the CHOGM outcome documents. The Forum in turn will also prepare and transmit submissions to heads of governments on their stated objectives to strengthen and advance the promotion and protection of human rights at the national level and across the Commonwealth.

The modalities, agenda and other details of the Kampala meeting will be determined and organized by the Uganda HRC in close consultation and with support of HRU. The Steering Committee however recommends that the Kampala meeting address inter alia: a) the significance and role of NHRIs in the promotion and protection of human rights towards an enabling environment for achieving the broader objectives of good governance, rule of law and accountability and in line with the Kampala CHOGM theme; and b) specific thematic discussions on priority issues that may be identified.

**London**  
**22 May 2007**