

Chapter 11:

International Activities

International training, consultation and assistance

While the Commission's agenda is primarily directed towards human rights issues within Australia, the Commission also participates in a range of international human rights activities, often at the invitation of the Federal Attorney-General or Government agencies.

The Commission briefs diplomats, hosts visiting international delegations and briefs them on the Commission's role within the Australian democratic system, undertakes training and provides technical assistance for Australian Government activities in other countries.

The Commission has taken a lead role in providing technical assistance to the Commonwealth Government as part of its human rights dialogue with China and anticipates taking a substantial role in the fledgling Australia-Vietnam dialogue.

Such programs, along with the Commission's participation in other international fora, such as the Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions, enable the Commission to assist in strengthening human rights protection in other countries. The international work also provides staff development and gives wider international perspectives which enhance the Commission's domestic work.

In 2005–06, as in past years, most of this has taken the form of technical cooperation programs with other countries. These training programs, which are based around sharing knowledge and expertise, are generally delivered through the framework of the Australian Government's development cooperation program, which is administered by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID).

In undertaking these activities, the Commission engages a variety of institutions and professionals relevant to the protection and promotion of human rights. For example, government agencies and civil society groups in other countries that are involved in the protection and promotion of human rights, and interested in how the Australian experience could be relevant to their country. The activities seek to strengthen the capacity of those institutions to protect human rights through the increased 'professionalism' of agencies involved in enforcing or implementing laws and the rule of law.

Most of the international training activities undertaken by the Commission centre on practical issues that affect the lives of individuals, such as domestic violence, police conduct, prison management, investigation techniques, human trafficking and so on. Notwithstanding this practical focus, efforts are made to ensure that the activities are firmly grounded in human rights principles set out in international law.

China-Australia Human Rights Technical Cooperation Program

The Commission's most substantial international program involvement is with the China-Australia Human Rights Technical Cooperation Program (HRTC), which is an integral part of Australia's annual inter-governmental Dialogue on Human Rights with China.

The high-level dialogue on human rights was initiated following discussions in August 1997 between Premier Li Peng and Prime Minister John Howard, under which the two countries agreed to undertake a program of technical cooperation to strengthen the administration, promotion and protection of human rights in China.

The Commission participates in dialogue meetings and will attend the 2006 dialogue in July in Canberra.

The HRTC program encompasses three principal themes: protection of the rights of women and children; protection of ethnic minority rights; and reform of the legal system.

The program aims to provide an important information base of human rights principles, ideas and strategies which can be drawn upon in the development of Chinese policies and practices. The program includes activities conducted in both China and Australia. Each activity in the program is implemented as a cooperative venture between HREOC and particular Chinese organisations. Following are some selected examples of activities implemented in the 2005–2006 HRTC Program.

- In November 2005 a delegation from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other relevant agencies undertook a study visit to examine Australian experience in compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.
- In November 2005 a Model United Nations was held in Shaanxi Province, in cooperation with the United Nations Association. The activity simulated the proceedings of the UN Commission on Human Rights in the debate and adoption of resolutions on selected human rights issues.
- In December 2005 an Australian team undertook consultations in Beijing with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and other relevant Chinese agencies on measures to strengthen China's compliance with the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

- In February 2006 two officials from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs arrived in Australia to undertake postgraduate studies in human rights at the University of Melbourne.
- In March 2006 an Australian team undertook consultations with China's national prosecution agency, the Supreme People's Procuratorate, on measures for protection of the rights of children in the criminal justice system.
- In April 2006 a workshop on human rights and family planning was held in Xinjiang Autonomous Region, in cooperation with the National Population and Family Planning Commission of China.
- In April 2006 a delegation from the All China Women's Federation visited Australia to study the role of organisations that provide legal assistance and support for women affected by domestic violence.
- In May 2006 a delegation from the Supreme People's Court of China visited Australia to study measures for protection of the rights of juveniles in the court system.
- In May 2006 a workshop on the rights of detainees was held in Fujian Province, in cooperation with the Ministry of Public Security. The workshop was designed during a study visit to Australia in February 2006 by officials of the Ministry of Public Security.
- In June 2006 a workshop on community corrections and non-custodial sentencing options was held in Beijing in cooperation with the Ministry of Justice.
- During 2005–06 the HRTC Program also included cooperation with the Department of Education of the Tibet Autonomous Region, focussing on access to education for minorities.

Australia-Vietnam Dialogue

The Commission also participates in the annual Australia-Vietnam Dialogue on International Organisations and Legal Issues, including human rights. During the fourth session, held in Australia in December 2005, the two governments confirmed their desire to establish a formal program of technical cooperation in the field of human rights.

In August 2005, the Commission participated in a Program Design Mission to Vietnam, for consultations with Vietnamese authorities that produced the design of the technical cooperation program. Pending formal approval by both governments, implementation of the program is expected to commence later in 2006. The Vietnamese agencies expected to participate in the program are the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, the Supreme People's Court and the Vietnam Women's Union.

Asia Pacific Forum

The Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions was established in 1996 as an association under the umbrella of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. The Commission hosted the Secretariat of the Forum until the Forum became a separate legal entity in 2002. It continues to provide accommodation and corporate support services to the secretariat, which coordinates the activities of the 15 member institutions from the Asia Pacific region.

The Australian Government, through the Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) has provided financial support for the Forum. Additional funding is provided by a range of donors including the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on a project-by-project basis.

The annual meetings and workshops of the Forum are among the largest and most comprehensive regular human rights meetings in the Asia Pacific region. They are a mechanism for the practical advancement of human rights, particularly because they bring together national human rights institutions, the United Nations, governments and non-government organisations in a practical and largely non-political setting.

In August 2005, the Commission participated in the 10th Annual meeting of the Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions held in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia.

In November 2005, the Commission's Sex Discrimination Unit and the APF co-hosted a three-day workshop for national human rights institutions and non-government organisations on human trafficking. The workshop focused on research and investigation into trafficking; engaging with the law and obtaining justice for trafficked people; working with civil society to support victims and their rights; and internal, cross-border and regional cooperation.

The Commission's Complaint Handling Section was awarded a tender by the Asia Pacific Forum to provide training for staff of the National Human Rights Commission of Mongolia. This project involved the development and presentation of a three-day training course in human rights investigation. The training program took place in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia from 27–29 March 2006. Twenty-two staff from government departments and non-government organisations in Mongolia attended the program which was conducted in English with simultaneous translation into Mongolian.

International visitors

In addition to formal programs of bilateral technical cooperation, the Commission frequently receives international visitors and participates in meetings with representatives of organisations concerned with human rights.

- In September 2005 the Commission hosted a meeting with a delegation of North Korean family planning officials visiting Australia under a program of the United Nations Population Fund.
- In April 2006 the Commission hosted a meeting with 20 Indonesian officials as part of a 12-week training program coordinated by the Castan Centre for Human Rights Law at Monash University. The trainees were drawn from government ministries, non-government organisations and academic institutions.
- In June 2006 a delegation from the Government of Laos visited the Commission. Their visit was part of a human rights study tour coordinated by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.
- In June 2006 a parliamentary delegation led by the President of the Senate of Malaysia visited the Commission under the auspices of a program of the Federal Parliament of Australia.

International conferences and meetings

The Commission has also maintained involvement in a number of multilateral bodies concerned with the protection and promotion of human rights. International conferences and meetings the Commission participated in during 2005–06 included:

- In August 2005 and February 2006, Commissioner Innes, as part of the Australian Government delegation, attended sessions of a working group of the United Nations General Assembly working towards a possible international convention on human rights and disability.
- In November/December 2005 and February 2006, Commissioner Calma attended the 11th session of the Commission on Human Rights Working Group on the Draft Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.
- In August/September 2005, Commissioner Goward attended the Tenth Anniversary Commemoration of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

For further information about Commissioners' international activities, see the chapter of the specific Commissioner.