

COMMONWEALTH HUMAN RIGHTS INITIATIVE

PRESS RELEASE

COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF GOVERNMENT MEETING: THE WAR ON TERROR SHOULD NOT BE A WAR ON HUMAN RIGHTS

In the two years since September 11, anti-terrorism legislation has been introduced and updated in many Commonwealth countries. The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI), an international NGO committed to the *practical* realisation of human rights in the Commonwealth, has repeatedly cautioned the Commonwealth that member states need to be alert to ensure that the anti-terror measures they adopt, collectively and individually, respect people's fundamental human rights.

The theme for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Nigeria from 5-8 December is "Democracy and Development: Partnerships for Prosperity and Peace". CHRI believes that any treatment of this topic by Heads of Government must include a discussion of the impact that anti-terrorism legislation, introduced by member states as part of the so-called "War on Terror", is having on democracy, development and the protection of people's fundamental human rights.

Terrorist laws must curb only terrorism and not the hard won civil liberties of ordinary people. However, an examination of anti-terror laws indicates that throughout the Commonwealth, under the guise of fighting terrorism many member states have created laws that unjustifiably restrict citizen's civil liberties, stifle legitimate rights of free speech, association and expressions of dissent and remove the human rights to legal representation, freedom from arbitrary detention and a fair trial.

CHRI fears that in too many cases the excuse of terrorism is being used to suppress popular democratic voice wherever convenient for the government - a practice not in keeping with the Harare principles.

CHRI urges CHOGM in 2003 to explicitly reiterate that while ensuring the safety and protection of citizens is an essential duty of government, governments must ensure that they remain respectful of their duties under international law and ensure that any laws they enact do not violate the human rights and freedoms of their citizens.

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