

# COMMONWEALTH HUMAN RIGHTS INITIATIVE

## PRESS RELEASE

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### COMMONWEALTH HEADS OF GOVERNMENT ARE MEETING TO DISCUSS DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT

The theme for this years Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, 'Democracy and Development: Partnerships for Prosperity and Peace', is disconcertingly topical when one considers the Commonwealth's vital statistics. Almost two thirds of the people living in the Commonwealth still live on less than \$2 a day. Half of the 130 million children in the world who do not have access to primary education live in the Commonwealth. Sixty per cent of HIV/AIDS cases worldwide are found in the Commonwealth. Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (home to more than 85% of the Commonwealth) have within them the largest concentrations of hungry people in the world. With just seven years to go to reach the MDG targets, many countries are slipping far behind schedule.

The Commonwealth's record on democracy is also far from exemplary. Zimbabwe and Pakistan remain suspended from the Commonwealth as a result of their failure to abide by the principles of democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights enshrined in the Harare Declaration. Throughout the Commonwealth, while many countries at least preserve a semblance of formal democracy, in reality their populations still do not truly enjoy their democratic rights.

It is against this background that CHOGM will be considering the Report of the Commonwealth Expert Group on Democracy and Development, which was set up after the last CHOGM in Australia. The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, an international NGO committed to the *practical* realisation of human rights in the Commonwealth, has argued, that when formulating its response: "The Commonwealth must adopt an approach which centralises human rights. This is not merely a moral stance, but can offer the framework on which to build a strategy which addresses the deficiencies in democracy and development which plague so many of the countries of the Commonwealth. In practical terms, a right-based approach places value on transparency, participation, accountability, inclusiveness, accommodation of diversity and dissent, and equity of status, opportunity and benefit."

In practice, this requires that the official Commonwealth must ensure the meaningful mainstreaming of human rights in all its work. Moreover, the Commonwealth needs to develop a mechanism for monitoring and evaluating on a regular basis the human rights performance of Commonwealth member states and their implementation of Commonwealth commitments. Only through such practical measures can the Commonwealth demonstrate its serious commitment to human rights, democracy and development.

The people of the Commonwealth will be watching closely to see whether the Commonwealth Heads of Government seize this opportunity to develop a practical, time-bound strategy for action, or lapse into the rhetoric that so often characterises meetings such as this one.

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