

Another missed opportunity?

The UN Human Rights Council holds its Fifth Session on 11-18 June 2007

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The Fifth Session of the UN Human Rights Council, which started on 11 June 2007, will provide an opportunity for Commonwealth human rights values and commitments to be a part of the foundations of a crucial new body in today's international human rights order. Speaking to the High Level Segment of the Fourth Session of the UN Human Rights Council, Hon. Don McKinnon, Commonwealth Secretary General, stated, "the modern Commonwealth is, without doubt, a human rights organization." Bangladesh, Cameroon, Canada, Ghana, India, Malaysia, Mauritius, Nigeria, Pakistan, South Africa, Sri Lanka, UK and Zambia, voted onto the UN Human Rights Council, represent more than one fourth of its 47 seats and approximately 27.5% of the world population. This fact indicates the potential impact a Commonwealth consensus can have in decision-making in the Council.

Commonwealth members elected to the Council a year ago on the basis of their human rights pledges. The 13 Commonwealth Council members have had a year to discuss and debate its directions within four sessions. The Fifth Session will decide the final shape of the Council.

The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) has monitored the performances of the 13 Commonwealth Council members and has observed that they have acted contrary to their commitments to both the Commonwealth and the UN. Overall their arguments, suggestions and stances have acted to weaken the powers and mechanisms of the Council. CHRI is concerned by some countries' attempts to curtail the independence and scope of the UN system for human rights monitoring and assistance, known collectively as Special Procedures. Commonwealth members have also made suggestions to restrict the basis used to review and assess individual UN countries' human rights performances under the universal periodic review mechanism. CHRI is also dismayed by attempts of some to restrict civil society participation in the Council's future procedures.

Under the Harare Declaration, Commonwealth are committed to promoting and protecting human rights as a fundamental political value. In the Singapore and Nassau Declarations they pledged to support the United Nations. Under the Aso Rock and Coolum Declarations they endorsed their support to the civil society. Finally, under the Millbrook Action Plan on the Harare Declaration Commonwealth countries committed to build a Commonwealth level consensus on global issues.

The past year's performance of many Commonwealth countries fails the commonwealth and the membership of this new human rights organisation. CHRI urges all Commonwealth members to promote state accountability by preserving and protecting the independence and scope of the Council's mechanisms and to ensure civil society's participation in the Council. This can only benefit the Commonwealth in the long run and will unequivocally demonstrate their commitment to uphold the highest human rights standards.

At this vital moment of decision, CHRI cautions that anything less will be seen as a step backwards in the Commonwealth's progress to be a true a human rights organisation.

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The Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative (CHRI) is an independent, non-partisan, international NGO working for the practical realisation of human rights in the countries of the Commonwealth.