

CHRI's message for CHOGM on rights defenders will be a feast of story and column ideas for media

Research has been completed for the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative's substantial six-chapter presentation to CHOGM for consideration in Trinidad and Tobago in November 2009.

The subject matter, which draws upon existing national, regional, Commonwealth and United Nations standards for the protection of human rights defenders (HRDs), breaks new ground within the Commonwealth in both its research and reporting of cases. Drawing upon trends and highlighting specific patterns of violation, for example violations against Women HRDs and Journalists, amongst others, the Report will act as the catalyst for the establishment of a "Commonwealth Human Rights Defenders Platform" (the Platform) at the Commonwealth Human Rights Forum at CHOGM 2009. The intended Platform will have a developed Advocacy Programme of Action for the next two-year period focused on bringing Commonwealth countries inline with necessary protection standards for HRDs.

The Commonwealth Journalists Association, which has strong ties —historic, philosophical, of shared purpose and of friendship — with CHRI, urges members of the profession to study the case material when the book is released and see how its elements apply at the parochial, national and international level in their environments.

Your efforts, your skills, your successes in getting the message out are essential to the process of raising awareness and effecting change to reduce human rights abuses everywhere in the Commonwealth.

We stress "everywhere." The government of no Commonwealth member, be it a prosperous founding Dominion or a struggling island state, can stand aloof from CHRI's research findings.

The idea is to reduce, through awareness, the vulnerability of the soldiers of humanity who take risks working for the most vulnerable whose rights are impaired.

Mere rubber stamp "blessing" of the presentation at CHOGM won't be enough. Commonwealth governments must actively embrace the report and encourage their NGOs to do the same. And above all, the media — us, members of CJA, and our other colleagues in the profession — must get the message out.

Then there must be the follow-ups of successes, failures and accountability.

A draft of Chapter 1 was distributed to the CHRI board recently. It starts to open a window on the widespread life-destroying apathy towards the Human Rights Defender issue.

Heather Collister, the Report Writer and Consultant with the Commonwealth Human Rights Initiative, said in her note to the Board recently that draft chapters would probably be available for internal editing in late May, possibly early June. In the meantime, the Head Researcher and Consultant, Marisa Dowswell, has undertaken the mammoth task of coordinating research, both quantitative and qualitative across 53 Commonwealth countries. With the overall Programme Direction from Lucy Mathieson, Human Rights Advocacy Programme Coordinator, advising that “this CHRI Report will be the first of its kind and will have input from some of the leading experts around the world”, the publication of the Report and the planned Platform provide promising scope for ensuring human rights are firmly fixed on the agenda at CHOGM 2009.

With CHRI’s UN Human Rights Council Consultant, R. Iniyani Ilango, pointing out that the Report will go a long way to stressing the need for Commonwealth governments to adhere to international human rights standards - the final product will be great meat for columnists within the Commonwealth and beyond.

The two chapters you journalists will be watching for are Chapters 5 and 6. Chapter 5 dwells on particularly vulnerable groups of human rights defenders, such as women, and disabled defenders. Chapter 6 contains the recommendations for change.

We shall keep you posted on this site as material becomes available.

Murray Burt
CJA past president
CHRI International Advisory Commission Member