

Opening remarks by Mr. Sanjoy Hazarika, International Director, CHRI

Excellencies, former Foreign Secretary Dr. Muchkund Dubey, former Chief Information Commissioner and Chair of CHRI, Mr. Wajahat Habibullah, Ambassador Rangachari, Professor (Dr.) YSR Murthy, Dr. Sudarshan and colleagues from O.P. Jindal University, ladies and gentlemen:

There is a wonderful phrase in Africa, which actually sums up all that we speak of in such elaborate opening remarks. It simply ask – all protocols observed. So all protocols having been observed, we move to the opening session of the launch of the programme.

I do not plan to actually say much here apart from welcoming you to this event, the first launch of a report that is 12 years old and has sought to review promises made at the HRC by countries of the Commonwealth – for that is our mandate – and how they've performed at the Council and back home with local laws. The Council is perhaps the most open process between civil society and states in the UN system. CSOs can meet with, walk in and get hold of representatives, ministers, and share their concerns and issues.

And in addition, they have a magical two minutes and 200 words to make their statements to express concern and agreement – or often, disagreement – with what their country or other countries are doing. They do so in the main Assembly hall. Plus, they can organise side events to release reports, roundtables and discussions on their issues ranging from trafficking and land mines to racial discrimination and freedom of expression. It is one of the major areas of engagement between states and civil society groups, where many quiet conversations take place as do loud confrontations.

But often, what is discussed there is not known back home and has little impact either on policy and certainly not in the public domain or media. In fact, the involvement of the public in foreign policy issues is restricted to think-tanks and roundtable discussions in universities. In the old days, Palestine, Vietnam and South African apartheid would bring people on the streets with regularity and noise. These appear almost to be a thing of the past. There was public involvement and political solidarity across party lines on the Palestine issue, of liberation struggles and against apartheid. In fact, CHRI's own birth 32 years ago grew out of the struggle against apartheid and

several Commonwealth associations came together to launch it as a human rights organisation focusing on rights issues across the Commonwealth. We work in the areas of access to justice, and access to information, primarily, with new work on media freedom.

Our work with/on and about the Human Rights Council (HRC) is based around the need to demystify the HRC and bring it home, back to the public spaces where it belongs, to reach and debate and help concerned groups provide inputs on a critical issue – the role of human rights in foreign policy formation.

This work would not have been possible without the dedicated team here at CHRI, especially our International Advocacy Programme's lead officer Aditi Patil who has led the research on it, and my research assistant, Sarthak Roy, as well as Catia Trevisani and interns Chinmay Panigrahi and Aditya Banerjee. But I would like to value the support of Yashasvi Nain, former programme lead on this process, who redesigned and standardised the format and was the spirit behind the ESTD for year. Yash is now Human Rights advisor with the Commonwealth Small States Office in Geneva – so good things happen to those who work here!