



Speech of

Senator Marise Payne

at the

**12th Annual Meeting of the Asia Pacific Forum of
National Human Rights Institutions**

Statement of the Australian Government

26 September 2007, Sydney

Thank you Chair

Honourable and distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Let me start by taking you back to 1996.

In Australia's tropical city of Darwin, representatives from national human rights institutions in Australia, India, Indonesia and New Zealand, met for the inaugural Asia Pacific Forum meeting.

Eleven years later, the Forum meeting is back in Australia and membership has grown from four to seventeen.

And since 1996 we have seen real progress in human rights in our region: more children are finishing school, people are healthier and living longer and - importantly in my view - women's rights are stronger.

Of course, the region has had its human rights setbacks. But we have also seen the rise of national human rights institutions striving to promote and protect human rights.

We have also seen a growing appreciation of cooperation between national human rights institutions, governments and civil society to secure human rights progress.

As Australia's Attorney-General highlighted in his keynote address, concerted action at national, regional and international levels can achieve results.

Many Governments, including Australia, signed the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in March 2007. This is a great result!

And in relation to promoting disability rights, the Australian Government welcomes tomorrow's discussion on the role that national institutions can play.

We commend the important leadership shown by Australia's Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission in tackling discriminatory practices and attitudes against people with a disability.

Let me also mention the well-respected role of the Asia Pacific Forum. It has had real practical effect strengthening national human rights institutions across the region.

It is a role that the Australian Government has long supported. Strong, independent national human rights institutions help to foster strong, stable communities in which all people can live with dignity. National institutions and their regional coordinating bodies can achieve practical results and advance issues in ways that, sometimes, international bodies cannot.

The Australian Government commends Forum members, the Forum Secretariat and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights for their advocacy in preserving the participation rights of national institutions and their regional coordinating bodies in the Human Rights Council.

We were pleased to play a prominent role in securing this result. But the Council's overall credibility will ultimately depend on its ability to act to address the most pressing human rights situations.

Multilateral bodies, like the Council, can benefit from the perspective that national institutions bring to addressing today's human rights challenges. The Government welcomes the contribution national institutions can make to the Universal Periodic Review process. This could potentially become an effective tool for assessing the human rights records of UN members.

The Australian Government hopes that our combined efforts will lead to a more balanced Council agenda. So far, this balance has been conspicuously lacking with the Council focusing disproportionately on Middle East issues.

While the Human Rights Council is yet to meet our expectations, we look to national institutions to continue to promote rights at the national and regional level. We continue to encourage you to think globally, act locally.

In closing, the Australian Government extends a warm welcome to those of you who have travelled from across the Asia-Pacific region and beyond to be here to share your expertise.

We are also pleased to see representation from Australia's civil society here for this important human rights event.

After eleven years, this Forum has made real progress advancing human rights in the region. And it is already clear that this is another productive meeting for all participants. We thank HREOC and the Asia Pacific Forum, as co-hosts, for the excellent hospitality they have extended to us all.

Thank you.