

**Australian Government's statement to the 8th Annual Meeting of the Asia Pacific
Forum of National Human Rights Institutions
Kathmandu, Nepal, 16-18 February 2004**

The Australian Government is once again very pleased to be participating as an observer in this the 8th annual meeting of the Asia-Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institutions.

In only a few years, the Forum has become central to our Region's human rights architecture. The commitment of the Secretariat and member institutions has been instrumental to increasing the appreciation and observance of human rights in our neighbourhood. I believe that the best evidence of the Forum's relevance and vibrancy can be seen in the continued expansion of its membership.

The Australian Government remains firmly committed to supporting the Forum. To give substance to this commitment, in 2003, the Australian Government approved a new triennial funding package for the Forum – Australian dollars 500 000 (around US dollars 400 000) per year for the next three years until 2005-06. With a sound financial base, the Forum will be able to continue to focus on its central task of supporting member human rights institutions assist the people of the Region.

At the same time, it is also important the Forum's funding base expand in line with its growing membership. We call upon other regional governments – in line with their abilities – to help create sustainability for the Forum.

This meeting and its major theme – *The Rule of Law in Countering Terrorism* – is timely. As recent events have shown – from the deplorable assassination of Sergio Vieira de Mello to bombing outrages in Indonesia - we cannot falter in meeting the threat terrorism poses to our shared democratic way of life.

Australia is committed to working with our regional partners to articulate a common and appropriate response. This has been evidenced by the recent memoranda of understanding on terrorism we have signed with India, East Timor, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Fiji, the Philippines and Cambodia. The landmark Bali Regional Ministerial Meeting on Counter-Terrorism (February 2004) co-chaired by Minister for Foreign Affairs Alexander Downer made good progress in transforming political commitment into concrete actions.

Within our borders too, we have taken decisive action by implementing an extensive range of legislative and administrative responses to the new security environment. The active contribution of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission to policy discussions has been a good example, I believe, of the vital role played by strong and independent national institutions in striking the right policy outcome of bolstering security while respecting human rights.

At the same time that we address immediate challenges, it is imperative that we enhance the foundations upon which human rights are built. Through our development assistance, Australia is committed to encouraging good governance throughout the Region.

Governance is the largest sectoral element of Australia's development assistance program (\$370m in 2003-04). This investment has helped our neighbours improve economic and financial management, strengthen public sector institutions, strengthen democratic systems and entrench the rule of law.

As President of the 60th session of the Commission on Human Rights, Australia will seek to promote a focused, responsive and efficient UN human rights system in which the fundamental importance of good governance and strong national institutions is recognised and supported. At the Commission, we will emphasise practical initiatives that result in improved human rights on the ground – exactly the sort of work that the AFP focuses on.

In closing, the Australian Government would like to thank Nepal for hosting this year's annual meeting. The arrangements have been excellent and the hospitality exceptional. It is our hope that holding this gathering in Kathmandu at this time will underscore firm regional support for Nepal's search for a lasting peace.