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Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues 23 May 2007

Statement by Mr Greg Roche, Assistant Secretary, Indigenous Land and Housing Group, Land Branch, Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs

Madam Chairperson,

Thank you for this opportunity to respond to a number of statements which Australian non-governmental organisations have made here this week about Australian Government policies and programs. It is a time of great reform in indigenous affairs in Australia and we think it would be useful for members of the Permanent Forum, observer organisations and observer states to hear about what we have been doing to improve outcomes for Australia's indigenous peoples.

The Australian Government shares with its NGOs represented here a sense of deep dissatisfaction with a number of important social, economic and health indicators of our indigenous people. Health indicators for our indigenous people are lower than for non-indigenous peoples, although there have been some recent improvements, which I will come to. Australian indigenous people are poorer, have high rates of unemployment and have a

disproportionate share of social problems, including violence, alcoholism and lifestyle-related diseases. The Australian Government has commenced a complete re-think of its approach. The issue is not one of simply increasing resources, although that is happening. The recent Australian Budget provided the biggest indigenous-specific investment on record, some \$3.5Billion, allocated across 8 programs. This is a real increase of 42% since 1996.

Housing

At the same time, the Australian Government has announced major reforms in the areas of housing and employment services. From 1 July 2008 the existing Indigenous specific housing and infrastructure program, the Community Housing Infrastructure Program (CHIP), will be replaced by a new Australian Remote Indigenous Accommodation Program which will focus on addressing the backlog of housing need in remote Australia. This initiative includes additional funding of \$293.6 million over four years. This change in policy and program approach followed an independent review of the Indigenous community housing system in 2006 and information from the recently released Australian Bureau of Statistics' Community Housing and Infrastructure Needs Survey (CHINS). Both of these provided data indicating that the current delivery mechanisms to deliver housing and infrastructure services for Indigenous people in remote Australia are not working.

Turning to the issue of
Indigenous Employment

The Australian Government has increased its investment in Indigenous employment, committing over \$614 million on Indigenous specific employment strategies in 2005-06.

The Indigenous Employment Policy was launched in 1999 to generate more employment opportunities for Australia's Indigenous people and has assisted more than 66 200 Indigenous Australians into employment and training so far.

Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) Program

There was criticism here yesterday about changes to the Community Development Employment Projects or CDEP Program. I would like to provide the members of the Forum and observers with some background on CDEP and the recent changes. The CDEP program was introduced in the 1970s as a way to combat 'passive welfare' in remote Indigenous communities. Over time the program grew to incorporate thousands of participants in locations across Australia. The CDEP program is not a job but a form of welfare, with participants taking part in a broad range of activities. While CDEP was helping some people build their skills and seek employment, for other people it became a destination in itself.

When the CDEP program moved to the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) in 2004, the Australian Government commenced a process of reform to move the focus of the program towards sustainable employment off CDEP. The reforms have included two discussion papers and two separate consultation

processes (the latest involving over 70 submissions and 1300 people at face-to-face sessions) to ensure communities are able to contribute to the future directions of the program.

While the CDEP program has shown significant improvements as a result of these reforms, with employment placements off CDEP rising each year, Indigenous Australians are still not benefiting from Australia's strong economy in the same way as other Australians. More changes are needed to ensure people are moving into real jobs. This will help improve opportunities for Indigenous Australians to increase their economic independence.

On 1 July 2007 the CDEP program will cease in urban and major regional centres. In these locations there are strong labour markets and high employer demand and Indigenous job seekers should benefit from this.

In these locations, instead of CDEP, the Australian Government is expanding its Structured Employment and Training Projects (STEP) brokerage services. The STEP program is a successful Indigenous-specific program, which is based on employer demand and focuses on sustainable jobs for participants.

Indigenous job seekers can also be assisted by mainstream employment programs, such as Job Network, which have shown excellent improvements in their services for Indigenous people in recent years. For example, in 2005-06 there were over 44 000 job placements for Indigenous job seekers by the Job Network which was

an increase of 14 per cent over the previous financial year and a new annual record.

During the consultation process regarding these changes, it was clear that this new model for employment services had acceptance from organisations and communities which could see that the CDEP program was not delivering outcomes, particularly in areas with strong labour markets. A key concern from stakeholders was that the transition to the new model be well managed to minimise disruption and stress to individuals, families and communities.

Making the transition as smooth as possible for CDEP participants, providers and communities is a top priority for the Australian Government. One of the key pieces of current work is helping as many participants as possible into real jobs prior to 1 July.

A further priority is for all levels of government to work together to maintain the appropriate levels of service provision where this has previously been subsidised by the CDEP program.

Health

Turning to the issue of health, the Australian Government shares concerns about the health of indigenous Australians and is committed to tackling indigenous disadvantage. A new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Performance Framework has been developed to monitor progress. The framework has 70 performance measures,

including disaggregated data in three groups: health status and outcomes, determinants of health and health system performance.

The first report against this Framework was released in November 2006 and showed that there have been real measurable improvements in particular areas of the health of Australian Indigenous peoples in recent years:

- Indigenous Australian mortality rates in the three jurisdictions for which there is good trend data decreased by 16% between 1991 and 2003;
- Infant mortality declined by 44% and perinatal mortality by around 55% over the same period
- Deaths caused by circulatory disease, the most common cause of death for Indigenous Australians, declined at a faster rate for Indigenous Australians than other Australians, and the gap has narrowed.

Over the past 10 years, funding for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health program has increased in real terms by more than 210%, to over \$440M in 2007/08.

Madam Chair, the Australian Government is very aware of the fact that much remains to be done to address indigenous disadvantage in our country. But I hope this contribution can provide you with a more

informed appreciation of the efforts that the Government is making in tackling these issues.