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United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues
16 May 2011

*Canada
Spain
Australia*

Follow-up to the recommendations of the Permanent Forum

Statement by Cath Halbert
Deputy Secretary
Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and
Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA)

(Check against delivery)

Madame
~~Mr~~ Chairman,

*you on your
new role.*

Australia is very pleased to be taking part once again in the Permanent Forum on Indigenous issues and welcomes this opportunity to update the Forum on developments in Indigenous policy. We also congratulate and welcome the new members of the Permanent Forum and acknowledge the talent and experience they bring. In particular, we are very proud of the achievements of Australia's Professor Megan Davis. We know that she will serve the Forum with distinction.

Last year the theme of the Forum was "indigenous peoples: development with culture and identity". In its recommendations on the theme the Permanent Forum advocated that States provide Indigenous peoples with "political, institutional and ...financial support ...to consolidate their own development models and concepts and practices of living well...". The Australian Government is committed to stronger engagement with Indigenous communities, in line with our support for the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples which is being supported by the Government, will provide a central mechanism with which governments, the corporate and community sectors can engage and partner on reform initiatives. It will also be an informed and strong national voice for the goals, aspirations and values of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

The establishment phase of the National Congress took place over 2010 and operations commenced in January 2011. I would like to congratulate Jody Broun, and Les Malezer who will be well known to many of you, on their election as Co-Chairs of the National Executive. The inaugural gathering of delegates will be held in June 2011, where the election of the part time members of the National Executive will take place. The Permanent Forum's ninth session report recommends the support for the full and effective participation of Indigenous women in decision-making spheres. The National Congress exemplifies this goal. It has male and female co-chairs, and it guarantees gender balance for delegates and officeholders.

Also indicative of the Australian Government's support for the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is the commitment to pursuing recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in the Constitution. This is another important step toward building a nation based on strong relations and mutual respect.

In December 2010, the Australian Government appointed an Expert Panel to lead a wide-ranging national public consultation and engagement program throughout 2011 to hear the Australian people's views on how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples might be recognised in the Constitution. We are pleased to note that Forum member Professor Megan Davis is also a member of that expert Panel as are the Co-Chairs of the national Congress of Australia's First Peoples. The Panel will report to the Government by December 2011 on possible options for constitutional change and the level of support they are likely to receive from the Australian public.

Delegates will recall that Australia announced its support for the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in 2009 as a further step after the National Apology to the Stolen Generations in a reformed approach to engagement with Indigenous peoples. It is integral to their enjoyment of the full range of human rights that Indigenous peoples have the same opportunities and life outcomes as Australians generally. Australia is committed to Closing the Gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The Australian Government recognises that this requires a genuine national collaboration involving all levels of government in partnership with Indigenous Australians, the corporate sector and non-profit organisations.

The Government's commitment to Closing the Gap is driven by three important imperatives:

- to overcome decades of under-investment in services and infrastructure;
- to encourage and support personal responsibility as the foundation for healthy, functional families and communities; and,
- to build new understanding and respect between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

We have spoken here before about Closing the Gap and I would like to provide the Forum with an update on progress.

The Government has forged significant reforms through the National Indigenous Reform Agreement and a range of National Partnership Agreements on Remote Housing, Early Childhood, Health, Remote Service Delivery and Economic Participation.

In February 2011, the Prime Minister's annual *Closing the Gap Report* was tabled in Parliament. The report sets out the progress being made towards reaching the 2008 Closing the Gap targets which are designed to address Indigenous disadvantage in key areas. One of these targets is to halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade, that is by 2018. Indigenous children are twice as likely to die before their fifth birthday as non-Indigenous children. This gap has been closing in recent years and improvements will continue with the expansion of preventative health care and child and maternal health services. The target to provide access to early childhood education for all Indigenous four year olds in remote communities within five years, that is by 2013, is on track to be achieved through a combination of infrastructure provision and support services.

The Australian Government has identified seven key building blocks addressing specific areas of Indigenous disadvantage, which are vital to Closing the Gap. One of these building blocks is economic participation; and the Australian Government has developed a draft Indigenous Economic Development Strategy, which will set the key priorities to support Indigenous economic development. Extensive consultation on this draft strategy was undertaken between May and December 2010, with over 110 written submissions and 20 public workshops held across Australia. The strategy is expected to be finalised this year.

One area where governments, Indigenous peoples and industry have worked together to create those economic opportunities is seen in the Torres Strait region in Australia's far north. The Torres Strait Islanders have a long history and tradition of fishing for subsistence and ceremony. Those traditional skills are now being applied to the commercial world, with Islanders assuming responsibility for much of the region's successful fishing industry. We would like to invite you to come to our side event on Friday to hear more about the culture of this fascinating part of Australia.

Mr Chairman, thank you for the opportunity to speak today. The Permanent Forum is invaluable for the range of ideas and information that is exchanged, and we are looking forward to an informative and productive fortnight.