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Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples

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

and

**John Toshie Kris – Chairperson
Torres Strait Regional Authority**

(Check against delivery)

The Australian Government was pleased to announce its support for the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples in April 2009. The announcement demonstrates the Australian Government's commitment to a reformed approach to engagement with Indigenous Australians, based on good faith, goodwill and mutual respect.

We would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Australian Human Rights Commission on the production of a range of community education materials on the Declaration. The Australian Government was happy to provide some financial assistance to allow wider distribution of the publications. The materials will increase awareness of the Declaration, and will act as a guide to help Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples understand the Declaration's principles. The Australian Government looks forward to continuing its engagement with the Australian Human Rights Commission and in particular the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commission.

Madam Chair, Australia's Indigenous policies are consistent with the spirit of the Declaration. For example, the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples will provide a central mechanism with which governments, the corporate and community sectors can engage and partner on reform initiatives.

Since announcing its support for the Declaration, the Australian Government has worked hard to ensure that our commitment to open and collaborative engagement with Indigenous Australians is upheld. This commitment has now been enshrined in the Government's Social Inclusion Principles and the Council of Australian Government's Service Delivery Principles for Programs and Services to Indigenous Australians.

The Service Delivery Principles include a specific Indigenous engagement principle: 'engagement with Indigenous men, women, children and communities should be central to the design and delivery of programs and services'. A practical example of this approach has been the employment of Indigenous Engagement Officers in communities across remote Australia to help improve engagement between communities and governments.

Under the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery, the Australian and relevant State and Northern Territory governments are changing the way they work with Indigenous Australians in a number of priority communities. The broad objectives of this National Partnership Agreement are to improve access to government services, raise service standards, improve governance and leadership, increase economic and social participation and promote personal responsibility and positive behaviours.

Madame Chair, our colleagues from the Torres Strait Regional Authority have done a lot of work on integrated service delivery, involving extensive consultation throughout the region. It is an excellent example of the practical application of the principles of the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and I would like to ask the TSRA Chairman, John Toshie Kris, to speak about the processes they have followed.

Thank you Chair

I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of this land where we are gathered today.

A key challenge for many government agencies is the coordination and delivery of programs across the policy agenda.

Ensuring that services are not duplicated and that tangible program results are achieved can be challenging.

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples explicitly encourages harmonious and cooperative relations between States and Traditional Inhabitants.

Today I would like to provide information about Integrated Service Delivery in Australia, specifically in the Torres Strait region, and highlight how cooperative relations between government and Traditional Inhabitants are being forged.

First though, let me give you some background about the Torres Strait.

Our community is located in the waterway that separates far northern continental Australia from Papua New Guinea. The Torres Strait Islands are administered by the Torres Strait Regional Authority, or T-S-R-A, set up by the Commonwealth Government in 1994 in response to local demands for greater autonomy.

The TSRA's mission is to empower our people, in our decisions, in our culture, for our future.

Our key aims are to build the capacity of Islanders to manage their own affairs according to ailan kastom or island custom, to protect and manage our environmental resources and to develop a strong economic base for the region.

The TSRA is leading an Integrated Service Delivery project to ensure that all community members benefit from more efficient and effective services through improved coordination in government service delivery.

The project was established in 2008, with significant, face to face community consultation informing the development of a regional plan, capturing the goals and aspirations of Traditional Inhabitants.

One of the strengths of the project is that from the outset, both the communities themselves and those organisations involved in the delivery of government services, agreed that a coordinated planning effort was needed.

For example, there are approximately 8 500 people in our region with community sizes ranging from 80 to 3000. Thirty government agencies operating at various levels have an on ground presence on Thursday Island with many servicing our area from nearby Cairns. Federal, State and Local government all recognised the need to come together for the benefit of local communities.

So far, we have completed the mapping of all government services delivered into the Torres Strait and identified duplications and gaps in service delivery which require government action.

What we are trying to do is meaningfully address a number of generational issues and begin to take a focused and holistic approach that makes it easier for our people to engage with government.

While the government presence is welcomed, it can become difficult for people on community to navigate the government network. This is a challenge for government itself.

An Integrated Service Delivery plan and priority actions are being developed for sign off by the communities and all levels of Australian government. All participants have displayed a high level of commitment to the project.

The progress towards achieving Integrated Service Delivery to date is not just based on high government commitments; significant face to face consultations with communities and service delivery agencies on the ground have occurred over the life of the project.

These consultations, which were facilitated by the TSRA have built trust between government and Traditional Inhabitants and provided us with quality rich information with which we can develop community specific action plans to deliver whole of government outcomes using outputs which cross over single agency responsibilities.

To conclude on this topic, I wish to call on the forum to recognise this initiative and the commitment in the Torres Strait, to Integrated Service Delivery and I would like to invite delegates here today to share in our journey as we move forward with this significant project to connect government services to our people.

Thank you or as we would say in our mother tongues, Koeyma Ezzo, Aw Ezzoaw.