

House of Representatives, Monday 24 September 2001

COMMITTEES: Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee: Report

Mr HOLLIS (Throsby) (12.40 p.m.) —On behalf of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade I present the committee's report entitled *The link between aid and human rights*, together with evidence received by the committee.

Ordered that the report be printed.

Mr HOLLIS —In the 39th parliament, the Human Rights Subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade has examined three significant issues. The report that I have just tabled is the result of the third of those examinations. The first was an investigation of freedom of religion and belief, tabled in November 2000, and the second was an examination of conditions in immigration detention centres tabled in June 2001—a report that generated a degree of interest. The terms of reference of this inquiry were narrow and specific. They asked us to focus on Australia's efforts to advance human rights in developing nations through the use of foreign aid in three specific areas: first, activities that have the advancement of human rights as their goal; second, the utility of differing instruments and channels for advancing those rights, and third, activities supported under the human rights program in the overall Australian aid program.

In all, this inquiry received 31 submissions from a variety of government and non-government organisations, as well as from two individuals. Their views on the general topic of advancing human rights in developing countries were valuable, as were their comments on the specific matters in the terms of reference.

The subcommittee was conscious that the terms of reference were restricted. It also knew that there were limitations on the time available to complete the inquiry and to table a report in this parliament. The subcommittee decided therefore not to hold a full program of public hearings to investigate and analyse the material it had received. Because it had not undertaken this process, it also believed that it would be inappropriate to make recommendations to the government.

A seminar was held on 5 July 2001, at which selected organisations were asked to participate. These bodies ensured that a cross-section of interests and views were represented, and I understand that everyone involved believed that it was a successful means of exchanging ideas on the topic. At this seminar, there was considerable discussion of a rights based approach to human rights. This issue had also been explored in a number of the submissions forwarded to the inquiry. Neither the seminar nor the subcommittee reached any conclusion about whether the poverty alleviation and sustainable development approach put forward by AusAID should be replaced by the rights based approach favoured by a number of NGOs. The subcommittee took the view that the discussion of these two views is evolutionary and therefore healthy for Australia's aid program.

The report therefore drew a number of conclusions from its examination of this topic, and these will be drawn to the attention of the minister and the Director-General of AusAID. They are: AusAID making additional efforts to ensure that its documentation is complete and easily available to those who are interested in its work; the convening by AusAID of seminars with Australian non-government organisations to discuss subjects of common interest, including specific linkages of aid and human rights; serious consideration by the Australian government of the cancellation of the debts of seriously indebted nations; the possibility of the Australian government taking the lead in convening an international conference on the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries, the HIPC initiative, to review the process of admission to that initiative, and continuation by AusAID of at least the current financial support to the Asia Pacific Forum of

Human Rights Institutions, the Centre for Democratic Institutions and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The subcommittee believes that acting on these conclusions would assist the debate on Australia's aid program. In particular, convening a program of seminars would formalise contact between AusAID and the NGOs with an interest in the aid program. If the HIPC initiative is not serving a wholly useful purpose, that of assisting indebted countries to deal effectively with their debts, the initiative needs to be rethought. An international conference is one way this process could begin. It could also be a means for Australia, as a middle-ranking power, to gain credit as one of the sponsors of the idea.

From the material we received during the inquiry, it is clear that the support given by AusAID to APF, CDI and UNHCR is crucial for the range of activities undertaken by these organisations. The subcommittee believes that this support should, if possible, be increased. I would particularly like to thank the chair of the subcommittee, Senator Marise Payne. This inquiry was initiated by her because of her strong interest in the topic. My thanks also to the staff, particularly to Patrick Regan, who has now left the service of the secretariat. His work will be very much missed. I commend the report to the House. (Time expired)

Mr SPEAKER—The time allotted for statements on the report has expired. Does the member for Throsby wish to move a motion in connection with the report to enable it to be debated at a later time?

Mr HOLLIS—I move:

That the House take note of the report.

I seek leave to continue my remarks later.

Leave granted; debate adjourned.