



PARLIAMENT OF AUSTRALIA

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Foreign Affairs Sub Committee

Chair: Senator Michael Forshaw
Sub Comm. Chair: Michael Danby MP

MEDIA RELEASE

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Committee wants annual reports on impacts of Free Trade Agreements

The Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade has called for annual reporting to parliament on the impact of free trade agreements in its report into Australia's relationship with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN).

ASEAN has become an important trading partner for Australia and it is now the sixth most important export destination for Australian goods and services. Australia is the eighth most important source of imports for ASEAN. The importance of the relationship has been recognised by the recent signing of the ASEAN–Australia–New Zealand FTA.

The report contains nine recommendations focusing on future free trade agreements and human rights issues.

Chair of the Committee, Senator Michael Forshaw, said: "There should be annual reports to the parliament on the impacts of individual free trade agreements and these should include reporting on human rights and environment issues".

"The policy of applying a greater focus on tariff barriers in trade negotiations, leaving a 'tail' of negotiation for non-tariff barriers, has not always appeared to work to Australia's immediate advantage. The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade should develop a single method of costing non-tariff barriers, to assist Australian FTA negotiators to identify, evaluate and target barriers to trade."

Senator Forshaw said telecommunications should also be an important component of FTAs and DFAT should ensure future FTAs contain effective telecommunications chapters.

"The recognition of professional qualifications is an important aspect of Australia's ability to trade with ASEAN member countries and the more widely Australian professional qualifications are recognised, the better Australia's position to cater to emergent demand in the region," he said. "FTAs should include a professional services working group to assist in creating professional linkages, including mutual recognition agreements."

The Committee reviewed various aspects of Australia's cooperation with ASEAN in the security arena including: the defence relationship; combating insurgency, terrorism and transnational crime; enhancing biosecurity and health; and securing radioactive materials.

"Australian agencies have provided a wide ranging and comprehensive contribution to the security of the ASEAN region. While the security status is bound to fluctuate, the Committee is confident that the level of co-operation will ensure long-term success," Senator Forshaw said.

Human rights issues attracted three recommendations in the report, which welcomed the development of the ASEAN Charter and the creation of an ASEAN human rights body.

"The new body will raise the profile of human rights and will create an opportunity to bring human rights issues before ASEAN Ministers," he said. "There is an opportunity for Australia to progress human rights through its relationship with the Asian Development Bank by using its influence to ensure that adherence to core labour standards become a precondition for loans from that bank."

The provision of aid to Burma and involvement of the AFP with the Burmese police force was another issue raised.

"While the Committee is satisfied with Australia's involvement, there nevertheless needs to be constant awareness of the possibility that the Burmese authorities will misuse the Australian assistance provided. There should be a willingness to withdraw this assistance should such evidence come to light."

The Committee also reviewed the impact of climate change on the ASEAN region.

“The Committee believes there are significant opportunities for Australia to offer leadership and technical assistance to ASEAN member countries as they meet the challenges of climate change. Australia’s present climate change engagements in the region, both government and non-government, are a good basis for meeting these challenges. They contribute to positive relationships in the region and, by enhancing capacity within ASEAN member states, build a foundation upon which future collaborations can occur,” Senator Forshaw concluded.

For media inquiries, contact the Sub-Committee Chairman, Michael Danby MP on (03) 9534 8126.

For all other inquiries, contact the Sub-Committee Secretary, John Carter, on 02 6277 4306 or visit the committee website at **www.aph.gov.au/jfadt**