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(Human Rights Subcommittee)

Reference: Australia's efforts to promote and protect freedom of religion and belief

FRIDAY, 22 OCTOBER 1999

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JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, DEFENCE AND TRADE
Human Rights Subcommittee

Friday, 22 October 1999

Members: Senator Ferguson *(Chair)*, Senators Bourne, Brownhill, Calvert, Chapman, Cook, Gibbs, Harradine, O'Brien, Payne, Quirke and Schacht and Fran Bailey, Mr Baird, Mr Brereton, Mr Laurie Ferguson, Mr Hawker, Mr Hollis, Mr Jull, Mrs De-Anne Kelly, Mr Lieberman, Mr Martin, Mrs Moylan, Mr Nugent, Mr O'Keefe, Mr Price, Mr Prosser, Mr Pyne, Mr Snowdon, Dr Southcott and Mr Andrew Thomson

Subcommittee members: Mr Nugent *(Chair)*, Mr Hollis *(Deputy Chair)*, Senators Bourne, Ferguson, Harradine, Payne and Schacht and Mr Baird, Mr Brereton, Mrs Moylan, Mr Price and Mr Pyne

Senators and members in attendance: Senator Harradine and Mr Nugent

Terms of reference for the inquiry:

To inquire into and report on Australia's efforts to promote and protect freedom of religion and belief, in particular:

1. the extent of violations of religious freedom around the world and the probable causes of those violations;

2. implications for other human rights arising from:

   . a lack of religious freedom and

   . religious differences; and

3. the most effective means by which the Australian government and NGOs can promote freedom of religion in the region and around the world.

WITNESSES

Subcommittee met at 9.30 a.m.

CHAIR—On behalf of the Human Rights Subcommittee of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade, I declare open this public hearing. Today's hearing is the third public hearing in our inquiry into Australia's efforts to promote and protect freedom of religion and belief. Over the next few months, the subcommittee plans to complete this part of the inquiry process with further public hearings in Brisbane and Canberra.

During this inquiry we have been focusing on three major areas concerning freedom of religion and belief, as set out in the terms of reference. The first area relates to the extent of violations that occur around the world and the probable causes of those violations. The second area for scrutiny is on other human rights when there are abuses of freedom of religion and belief. The final major focus of the inquiry is on the most effective ways in which government, and non-government organisations, can promote freedom of religion and belief.

Today we expect to gather further evidence on all the terms of reference—that is, we will examine the kinds and extent of violations that occur in the world. Where we can, we will also look into the causes of those violations and their consequences. Finally, we hope to hear more from our witnesses on some of their recommendations to improve respect for freedom of religion and belief, both at home and abroad.

[9.32 a.m.]

DOAN, Mr Trung, Convenor, Task Force for the Religious Freedom Inquiry, Vietnamese Community in Australia

THICH, Venerable Quang Ba, Buddhist Leader, Vietnamese Community in Australia

CHAIR—I welcome our first witnesses who are representatives from the Vietnamese Community in Australia. Do you have any comment about the capacity in which you appear?

Venerable Thich—I am the senior Buddhist monk of the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam in Australia. I am here to speak for my church in Australia and in Vietnam as well as for the Vietnamese community in Australia.

CHAIR—The subcommittee prefers that all evidence be given in public, but should you at any stage wish to give evidence in private you may ask to do so and the subcommittee will give consideration to your request. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence on oath, I should advise you that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and therefore have the same standing as proceedings of the House itself. I invite you to make an opening statement, if you wish, and then we will get down to questions.

Mr Doan—Thank you very much. Mr Chairman and distinguished members of the committee, on behalf of the Vietnamese community in Australia we thank you for the opportunity to be here today. It is possible to get a superficial impression that the situation of religious freedom in Vietnam is improving overall. If someone runs that argument, the implied argument is that Australia should therefore not take steps that anger Hanoi lest that jeopardises that trend. That is the first thing that we would like to tackle today. The appearance of improvement may be there, because Hanoi engineers that appearance, but in reality the situation is actually worsening. I would like to bring to your attention some examples, which also update our submission.

The first point is that, on the outside, Hanoi allowed the appointment of a Catholic archbishop in Saigon last April. But, on the inside, Hanoi works to undermine him and keep him in check. It has created a so-called Catholic Patriotic Association to infiltrate and sow divisions within the church. Member priests of that association enjoy special privileges, such as opportunities to travel abroad, and they are allowed to collect donations and to renovate their churches.

The second point is that, on the outside, hundreds of thousands of Catholics, Hoa Hao Buddhists and Cao Dai believers have, you may be aware, been allowed in the last few months to gather for big religious events in Vietnam. But, on the inside, we know that police have set up checkpoints and hassled food supply stations to try and reduce the number of people attending. We are also aware that secret agents have been sent in from Hanoi to Kien Giang to search for and question those who organised the Hoa Hao Buddhist event.

On the one hand, in late 1998 a number of religious prisoners were freed. On the other hand, some of them were in very ill health—and that may be one of the reasons they were released—and they have also been followed, harassed or put under house arrest under

directive 31/CP, which was issued last April. A year later, in April 1999, decree 26 was born, which formally outlawed independent churches and formalised the confiscation of church properties. I also point out that on the same day that decree 26 was issued, the Senate of the Australian parliament made a resolution recommending that the Hanoi government improve religious freedom in Vietnam. You might recall that.

You may also be aware that, on the one hand, Hanoi late last year let in the United Nations Special Rapporteur on religious intolerance. On the other hand, it stopped him from visiting certain dissidents. After the Special Rapporteur's report was published, Hanoi held a press conference and vowed to never again allow any more such visits. Since that visit the situation has worsened.

In May this year, Assemblies of God pastors Paul Tran Dinh Ai and Lo Van Hen were arrested during a bible study session in Hanoi. In August and September, a number of Buddhists, including the Venerable Thich Duc Nhuan, the Venerable Thich Tue Si and the Venerable Thich Khong Tanh were arrested and questioned about their religious activities. The Venerable Khong Tanh in particular was told by his interrogators that the government had a pending order to re-arrest all leaders of the UBCV, the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam. Also, since September, Mr Tran Quang Chau, a leader of the Cao Dai religion, has been held under house arrest. He is among four people who last month co-signed an open letter to the government seeking recognition of independent churches and the return of their confiscated properties.

The new arrests that I have just mentioned are in addition to the existing ones. Hanoi has continued to keep the 81-year-old Most Venerable Thich Huyen Quang, the Supreme Patriarch of the United Buddhist Church of Vietnam, under arrest for more than 22 years, despite repeated international calls for his freedom and despite his ill health.

We believe that all the foregoing points, and more, show clearly that the situation in Vietnam is actually getting worse, not getting better. But even if one takes the position that the situation is improving, Australia, we believe, should still not take a 'hands-off, wait and see' approach because any improvements that you might see can be and will be reversed if the world stops watching. And watching, in a systematic and ongoing way, is part of the recommendations that we are making.

If you have any doubt about the eight recommendations in our submission, we hope that you will challenge us on them today, we will try and dissect the eight recommendations and, hopefully, at the end of our discussions you will be as convinced as we are that what they are trying to achieve is worth doing and that they are do-able.

With regard to those eight recommendations, we would like to highlight three points. The first is that we believe that a strategy that is likely to be most effective would be two-pronged. On the one hand, Australia would try to help the people in Vietnam and other countries in their own efforts to improve their religious freedom. On the other hand, we would try at the same time to restrain their governments' capacity to oppress them while they are doing so. Each of our eight recommendations falls into one or both of those categories.

We would also like to stress that our recommendations do not involve any hectoring. For example, under our recommendations the government will not say, 'You shall release religious prisoners, or else,' but will say, 'Let's have a regular dialogue between our governments about such practical things as their release or the return of their church properties, but, while they are still there, please do respect their visiting rights and we would like to visit them.' Also, the government will not say, 'We will apply aid conditionality,' but will say, 'We will use something like five per cent of our aid to give to your citizens' churches to run their worthwhile poverty alleviation projects.'

The government will not say, 'We will impose our values on you.' It will say, 'Our Radio Australia will promote the universal values which are expressed in international human rights instruments which you have signed.' That is the first point about our recommendations being part of a two-pronged strategy. The second point I would like to highlight is that we believe there is a need to continue working after this inquiry.

We have recommended an ongoing advisory group to monitor those of your recommendations that the government, hopefully, agrees to implement and also to continue making further recommendations and to follow up on them. We also recommended that the government regularly table reports in the parliament. Those reports can be about those visits or attempted visits or even wider in scope. Together, these two proposals would help to maintain continued progress and make small incremental steps in the years ahead.

The final point that we would like to make about our recommendations is this. We think nothing much will happen with the current governmental attitude, and we think public debates and even legislation might be needed to change it. You, us and the other organisations making submissions do not want to work hard here only to find that, when you make recommendations, those recommendations are not accepted or are watered down by the government. The government has told us that it prefers what it calls a cooperative approach with Hanoi. It made this comment in response to our proposal to it about visits to prisoners, which was similar to the one about visits to religious prisoners but wider in scope, to do with all political prisoners.

The trouble with that so-called cooperative approach is that this usually means Canberra doing only what it thinks Hanoi will tolerate and no more. We believe this approach has not achieved results that are as good as Australia is capable of achieving. We believe public debates are needed to gradually change that attitude, and we hope the committee can foster those debates. One possibility is the committee holding a press conference or something of a similar nature—public debates in the parliament, speeches in the parliament, et cetera—to publicise the findings and recommendations of this inquiry. In future, if the government again rejects key recommendations of this inquiry, as it did with some of the recommendations in the report entitled *Improving, but. . . : Australia's regional dialogue on human rights*, perhaps there should be another press conference or something like that to publicise that fact.

Another possibility is legislation. You are aware of the American International Religious Freedom Act 1998. In your discussion paper you mention that some of the measures in that act are maybe broader than Australia can handle. We agree with that, but that does not mean that the Senate or the House of Representatives could not introduce a smaller bill which

might contain some of your key recommendations. If that bill passes, that would be very good, because your recommendations would become law. Even if it did not pass, the debates and negotiations around it might produce outcomes that would not have been possible otherwise.

In conclusion, we would like to summarise our four main points. The first point is that Hanoi is actually stepping up, not relaxing, its religious oppression. The second point is that our recommendations form a coherent strategy, and none of the recommendations involves any hectoring. The third point is that an ongoing advisory group and regular parliamentary reporting would help to maintain continued focus after this inquiry ends. The final point is that we believe your committee and the parliament can do quite a lot to ensure that your recommendations get the action that they deserve—for example, by way of debates or even legislation.

CHAIR—Firstly, your submission is probably one of the most thorough that has been presented to us, and you are to be complimented on that, there is no question about that. Secondly, you have put your finger on an eternal frustration of parliamentary committees: when governments do not understand the wisdom of the committees' recommendations and findings. That happens not only to this committee and not only under this government, but the secret is that we all keep trying. You mentioned Radio Australia. Does Radio Australia presently reach Vietnam?

Mr Doan—Yes, it does.

Venerable Thich—There have been fewer broadcasting hours in the last few years but it is still—

CHAIR—Yes—with the general cutback on Radio Australia.

Venerable Thich—very well covered, with a very clear signal.

Mr Doan—The parliament had an inquiry about Radio Australia a few years ago in relation to its funding. From memory, at that inquiry Radio Australia claimed that it had hundreds of thousands of listeners.

CHAIR—One of the frustrations we have is that previously we recommended to the government, for example, that it reopen Cox Peninsula, but the government is not going to do that. In fact, I understand that Radio Australia, apart from operating Shepparton, is more likely to buy time out of Singapore and somewhere else overseas to extend its range rather than reopening Cox Peninsula.

In terms of Radio Australia, what you are asking about is the programming content changing rather than extra technical range. I just want to clarify that that is what we are talking about.

Mr Doan—That is exactly what we are saying.

CHAIR—I would like to explore with you the subject of the linkage between aid and the freedom of religion factor. Could you amplify that a little more? I think you said that you do not really want to see it tied directly but, on the other hand, you are saying that you want to see a component allocated specifically for religious freedom matters. Did I hear you correctly?

Mr Doan—Our starting point is that we believe aspects of Australia's relationship with Vietnam such as aid should be used whenever possible to improve human rights in general, and religious freedom in particular. We are aware that the government has rejected aid conditionality and, rather than trying to hit that wall again and again, we believe that there may be other ways of achieving the objective without using aid conditionality. One way to do that is to use aid money itself to give to organisations in Vietnam and other countries so that they themselves can try to improve their own religious freedom.

The government has argued that, if you use aid conditionality, you may actually hurt the people and it may not be effective. What we are saying is that we are not asking you to withdraw that aid money, but use a small part of that money to give to independent churches and for them to do things that improve their own religious freedom.

CHAIR—Are you talking about handing over a sum of money or do you have in mind particular projects that would come under that percentage?

Venerable Thich—Could I put my idea in. The recommendation is to try to make the Vietnamese government compromise with some of the aid money to not necessarily all go direct to the government bodies but to go into some non-government organisations. It may be a human rights activist organisation, religious charity activities or whatever else the government chooses. Of course, all the non-government organisations in Vietnam have to be approved and controlled by government. There is no real freedom of association over there, but at least there is some level of contact between the Australian government with the Vietnamese government and the Vietnamese non-government organisations.

Not all the money goes to the government alone. If that can be done through the AusAID program and other channels—through other Australian NGOs, for example—then we would create a new atmosphere where non-government organisations in Vietnam start to have direct contact, direct dialogue and direct cooperation with government bodies and non-government organisations overseas, for example, including the church organisations.

CHAIR—Have you talked to AusAID about this?

Mr Doan—I have talked with Miss Louise Marchand, head of the Vietnamese section of AusAID, about our recommendations and we have exchanged documents. I have sent her a copy of this and she has sent me the AusAID program for Vietnam, so we are aware of what is happening there.

CHAIR—But you have not changed their minds; is that what you are saying?

Mr Doan—We were not trying to persuade them because they are not the ones to be persuaded. It is the government that tells them what to do, as we understand it. We would

like to highlight a point one might not be aware of. In Vietnam, most of the independent churches have been outlawed. That fact means that these independent churches, if they get aid from Australia and are allowed to operate their programs using that money, that in itself is relieving the suppression of their freedom because they are allowed to operate. So, by giving that aid, even though a small percentage, even something like five per cent, you are actually helping the situation on the ground because these organisations are allowed to run their own programs, establish contact with the people out there, the needy and the poor who need their help, and thereby strengthen their strength.

CHAIR—One of the things that the Australian government has been active in recently is the broader human rights context—I think we all accept freedom of religion and belief is part of that broader human rights concern—and to encourage the establishment of independent human rights bodies in a number of countries. We have done it in Indonesia; we are doing it in Thailand at the moment. We are aware that there are some exploratory talks going on with Vietnam in that context as well. Clearly, where that happens, although it is not an Australian activity per se, nevertheless Australian expertise and Australian money is largely driving that regional human rights process. Would you see that as being in fact perhaps a way that our funding of that sort of activity could be productive rather than necessarily giving money to a specific church on the ground in Vietnam?

Mr Doan—We are aware of the fact that there is some exploration going on about that issue. But that human rights commission, or whatever it is called, is only going to be as good as the people in that commission and as good as the constraints put around it. Given our experience in the past, we do not hold very high hopes that that commission will have as much freedom or as many teeth as it may need. But when its recommendations are not heeded, then what is the point? It is not that we are saying that we should not do it. We are saying that should be done but that should not be the only thing that is done.

Venerable Thich—My opinion is that something like an independent human rights commission, like the one we have in Indonesia or Thailand, would be an ideal one for Vietnam. Even that would be tightly controlled, even directly run by the plain clothes government officials in Vietnam. It is still better than not. If our diplomatic chain can make it happen, I still believe that this is another progressive step because in the past the government in Vietnam always denied that kind of a structure which may attract a lot of appeals or complaints. Of course, at the moment the government of Vietnam still receives complaints but purely on civil things. It is very hard for somebody, even within their sanctioned church organisations to complain because they are now shut—there is no allowance to do so.

If there is some appeal commission, even the people will be aware that that commission is also run by another kind of government. It may be another extended arm of government. A central committee on religion is still better than not. I do not know for sure whether our aid money can go to fund that commission. If the government in Vietnam agreed to set up that commission and then we just gave money, there is no way to monitor, to control it, to inspect their work and the result, the effect of the commission's work. That is what I am concerned about.

CHAIR—We are here to hear your input but, just very quickly, to put that in context, the regional human rights initiative and the secretariat is here in Australia—in Sydney, and it effectively sits alongside HREOC—but it is funded and staffed as an independent activity. A number of independent human rights bodies have been set up and the regional body only agrees to them being set up on certain conditions. Clearly you have got to get the right people, clearly it has got to be seen to be independent, and then you are very heavily dependent on that body acting in an independent way. But they do have regular workshops and meetings to talk to each other and to monitor activities.

I think it would be fair to say that Australia would not be keen on participating in that sort of activity unless there was clear evidence that they were doing the best they can. An example that comes to mind is that the body that was set up in Indonesia actually has got some good people and has been doing some good work in extremely difficult conditions of recent times. That does not mean to say that everything is perfect by any means, but at least they are making the effort and they have been seen to be independent, which I think is an important factor. Anyway, I should not be doing the talking; you should.

Senator HARRADINE—Following up on the question of conditionality, your approach to this is a more positive approach, are you saying?

Mr Doan—Yes.

Senator HARRADINE—I noticed in your very excellent and full submission you refer to the EU and its concerns. Do the members of the EU make contributions directly to NGOs in Vietnam and so directly to the independent churches in Vietnam for a project?

Mr Doan—I think we have to take this question on notice. I am not aware of any aid going straight from EU members or EU to independent organisations.

Senator HARRADINE—I am just wondering about the practicality of that. Would the Vietnamese government be able to prevent such moneys from going to the independent churches?

Mr Doan—Firstly, I would like to raise a point that it is not only Germany, which is now no longer the president of the EU, now it is Norway, and Norway has said the same thing—only last month, Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik said that during his visit. So both presidents have said the same thing.

About Hanoi being able to prevent it, we are not aware of our recommendation being effected anywhere else at the moment so it might be the first time, and therefore there is always the possibility that Hanoi will try to prevent it. But, as we say in our submission here, there are things that we can do to make it less likely for Hanoi to prevent us. For example, if by saying, 'Only five per cent is going to be used for this purpose and your objection to that may raise attention to the remaining 95 per cent,' that may make Hanoi think twice. Also, we can raise very good arguments like, 'You actually profess to have respect for religious freedom, so what is wrong with this,' et cetera. But then, even if finally Hanoi is successful at stopping that effort, the fact that that happens can be used as a benefit

because then Australia would know, the Australian parliament would know, the people would know, and that can be an input to our policy.

Venerable Thich—My information is yes, in the past and at the present there are NGOs around the world coming to work in Vietnam. Some of them are allowed contact direct with so-called Vietnamese NGOs, but I doubt that church organisations, and even the government sanctioned ones, are free to contact overseas NGOs without this scrutiny and veto right of the government committee on religions.

If we could break that war, it would mean that either AusAID or Australian NGOs could have a bit more freedom to contact Vietnamese NGOs, particularly the so-called Vietnamese religious NGOs. That may create another step, a very small step.

In fact the level of legitimising the oppression of the religious movement in Vietnam is such that it will become law. Remember that after the recently introduced legislation, or prime ministerial decree, it has become law for the government to interfere in everything, not only in independent churches but also in their own creations. They will not allow churches, including the Roman Catholic Church, the Vietnamese Buddhist church, and the Hoa Hao and Cao Dai churches just recently created by government. The game of divide and rule, the game of creating conflict and many other tactics have been used by the government to make more and more problems within each religion.

It is very hard for us to think at that level, but at least at the outset we should do something, as our recommendation said, to make some direct and indirect pressure—softly, not very confrontationally—at that level. We need to keep up a regular dialogue and a regular exchange of information. If our diplomatic officials in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City could visit some church leaders, the government sector and independent churches, that may slowly make some changes.

Senator HARRADINE—What is your perception of the priority that the Australian government and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade give to expressions of concern about religious freedom in Vietnam? You have a list of 145 religious prisoners and house detainees. Clearly, that is a matter of concern to Amnesty. The Australian government would know about that matter—at least the department of foreign affairs would know about that matter. Do you know what they are doing about it?

Mr Doan—The government has told us that it has been making and will continue to make representations to Hanoi about a list of political and religious prisoners. It has not told us who is on that list. We understand that list is pretty short, so it does not cover all the people we have mentioned here.

Venerable Thich—From my regular contact with DFAT officials, particularly the head of the bureau of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, I have been informed that whenever there is some small pressure or some request from us—maybe from a letter from an MP—they will do something. Otherwise they are busy with money-making businesses. There is the embassy in Vietnam, of course, and the consulate officials in Ho Chi Minh City. I do not know how many staff would specialise in this kind of monitoring process or whether we have anything like that yet.

That is why we have come here to ask whether the parliament can set up some staff, even part time, in our diplomatic offices in Vietnam to monitor this particular problem which affects the whole society. With the decline of moral values in Vietnam in the many years since the Communists came into office—60 years or so in Hanoi and very soon 25 years in the south—society has gone down a very serious trail of destruction. We have so much worry about the social, cultural and moral structure of Vietnam because of the way they govern and because of the way they use fear and oppression to shut people's eyes and mouths. My view is that people have more rights but they have less and less freedom.

Senator HARRADINE—That is a view that was expressed by the EU president, that you have mentioned on page 48:

We have the impression there is less tolerance now, more limitations for the press (and) religious communities, and we have concerns over sectors . . . (such as) political prisoners.

Venerable Thich—To put some additional information, they even increased the budget on a lot more personnel for the government committee on religion. They even sent the staff in from that committee to control the monks who are allowed to study in Dili or Taipei. They are organising a communist youth league in Sydney. They have started to try to normalise their training system within their membership. They are doing many things with the resources in different ways. The government has put in more budget and more resources to keep a tight control in different ways. They are trying to escape the international criticism by legitimising their oppression by introducing this directive. Anyone who speaks out will fall under this criminal ring, you see.

Mr Doan—I return to your question, Senator, about whether EU members have had any direct dealings with NGOs before. I would like to add two points. Firstly, it would be comforting if we knew this had been done by other people. But even if it has not been done by other people, it does not mean it is not right.

Senator HARRADINE—I think it is an imaginative approach.

Mr Doan—Yes, but secondly, this quote that we gave from the UNDP, Edouard Wattez, said that virtually none of the $5 billion to Vietnam had gone to Vietnamese citizens. That may give you an indication that the UNDP is frustrated with the fact that aid money is not benefiting the normal people on the street. Therefore, that might be an indication that UNDP itself might be prepared to deal with NGOs that help people on the street.

CHAIR—I would like to move to two other subjects. Your recommendation 6 refers to a regular dialogue between our government and the Vietnamese government on human rights with the emphasis, I think you say, on results, practical work, accountability and community consultation. What kind of outcomes would you realistically expect from such a dialogue, and would you expect Australia to expand that bilateral human rights dialogue beyond Vietnam? We already do it for China, for example. Are you suggesting something on the same model for Vietnam? I would appreciate it if you expanded a bit on some of your thoughts there.

Mr Doan—We are aware of the Australia-China dialogue, but you may be aware that there have been a few criticisms of that dialogue, that it is not producing beneficial results that the ordinary people on the street can see. We tend to agree with those criticisms.

CHAIR—Have you read my report that was tabled last Monday from the last dialogue in Beijing?

Mr Doan—No, I have not read it.

CHAIR—You should.

Mr Doan—Yes, I will.

CHAIR—I am not going to debate it at the moment, but I am just saying that I went on the last dialogue and I think there are some results there. I agree that they are not appreciated in the general community. But my report on the last dialogue in Beijing was tabled last Monday and it specifically has an annexe of a whole range of things that we think are showing some signs of improvement. This is for your information.

Mr Doan—We are not saying that dialogue does not produce any result. We are saying that dialogue with China is not producing as many good results as it could have.

CHAIR—That is why I asked: what do you expect to get out of this and how do you expect to get something out of it?

Mr Doan—We mentioned two things in our submission. Firstly, a discussion of the list of religious prisoners and, through the dialogue as well as through embassy representations, a continued representation by the Australian government for the release of these prisoners. Secondly, we mention the return of confiscated church properties. At every meeting, we could discuss those properties. The people involved in the dialogue could visit Vietnam and see the properties or meet the prisoners they are talking about. A third issue relates to what you mentioned before, and that is the creation of that human rights commission.

We hope the dialogue can achieve things like that. We believe parliament should have a hand in this matter. We should not leave it completely to government officials because parliament can help to identify the three targets that I have just mentioned.

CHAIR—That is one of the reasons that I went on the China dialogue as a member of parliament last time. It was quite deliberately broadened out from including just officials.

Venerable Thich—To put my own contribution to your question, could we set up another parliamentary delegation to visit Vietnam on this matter? We had one in 1993. Six years have passed. A lot of recommendations have been made by that delegation and they produced a big report like this. But I do not know whether the joint committee followed up on any other recommendation from that delegation.

My other suggestion is that the government, under the recommendation of this committee, create a new kind of relationship with government officials going to talk to

government officials in Hanoi. AusAID or our embassy should also organise a goodwill visit to our church community in Vietnam from church leaders in Australia, at a community level not at a government level, but under the sanction of our government. We do send a lot of trade groups and cultural and sports groups.

The Catholic cardinal of Sydney visited Vietnam four or five years ago on his own initiative. Perhaps this committee or any other body could create regular or irregular visits by community or religious leaders of Australia. This could include different religious organisations which could visit Vietnam to exchange information on goodwill visits. Maybe there could be some financial contribution from Australian religious organisations to the Vietnamese religious organisations, including government sanctioned and non-sanctioned groups in Vietnam. This could be another step that would do something for Vietnam.

CHAIR—In terms of looking for results from such dialogue, I have been conscious of the criticisms that have been made of the China dialogue. What do you think you can achieve? You say that you will make representations about or identify people who are prisoners and visit the prisoners, but that does not guarantee that the Vietnamese government are going to respond in a positive sense. You can hand over a list of names and you can talk about individual cases. It does not mean to say that anything will actually happen.

I am not saying that bringing those things to light is not in itself of some value. What I am saying is that even if you make those representations, you still run the risk, if there is no positive response, that you then get the same criticism in the Australian community that you get over the China dialogue: what is it producing?

Mr Doan—We are aware that with the Australia-China dialogue there have been projects such as one that I recall to educate about women's rights, if I remember correctly. That sounds very good, and it is very good. We are saying that we should not just try to do those things. Those things are, in a way, fairly easy to do because the Vietnamese government and the Chinese government are not likely to stop Australia doing that; they are likely to accept it fairly easily. But we should not just restrict ourselves to things that are easily accepted by Beijing or Hanoi. We should also do things that Hanoi may be unhappy about, otherwise we are just going along with them.

CHAIR—So what, specifically, would you do? Hand over a list of people who are in prison—

Mr Doan—Try and visit the people—

CHAIR—We already do that with China, and we have done it every year for the last three years during the human rights dialogue. We have handed over a list of people that NGOs have given us, as well as names that government is aware of, and talked to the Chinese about those cases and urged them to review and release.

Mr Doan—The dialogue could organise visits by religious organisations in Australia to their counterparts in Vietnam, for example. That is another thing that the dialogue could do.

CHAIR—One of the problems with going and visiting prisoners is that when a European parliamentary delegation went to Tibet three or four years ago and asked to go to one of the prisons and see some of the political prisoners there, all the reports were that after that had happened some really unspeakable things happened to those particular prisoners. So you go and ask to see prisoners perhaps at some peril to the prisoners.

Mr Doan—That is why we say the visits should not just be done by parliamentary visits but by government officials who are on the ground and who can visit them regularly. That way, if we are visiting them this week and next month you come back and they are not there, the prisoner guards know that you know.

CHAIR—Yes.

Mr Doan—In relation to the last part of your question about the extension of this concept to other countries, we have no problems with that. In fact, in our submission we say that all of our recommendations are framed in relation to Vietnam but that we believe most of them are applicable to other countries. This one is one of those.

CHAIR—In terms of this committee or a parliamentary committee taking a more ongoing interest in human rights in Vietnam, quite apart from this inquiry, I think that is a point that this committee could well take on board and would have a look at. There are financial limitations on parliamentary committees travelling overseas. We do not get any money—it is as simple as that. But the committee has been known to go overseas at the private expense of the members of the committee. That has happened before, and it has happened since I have been the chair of the committee, so it is possible for it to happen again.

Venerable Thich—I agree that there is some limitation on what Australia can do. But, if we could work together, between the church representatives, the community representatives, the committee and, of course, the DFAT officials we can find a better approach to solve the problem—softly, softly, if you like. The problem in the past has been that we have not had much roundtable discussion and briefings between the community, church leaders and human rights activists here in Australia and the DAFT officials and, of course, with the committee members.

CHAIR—DFAT does, as I understand it, have regular briefings with NGOs in this country.

Venerable Thich—Yes. Unfortunately, the Vietnamese community is not accredited in that kind of NGO yet. I do not know whether that is our fault or because there has been an automatic exclusion, but we have to put specific requests before I can come to talk to them. We are not in that roundtable briefing yet.

CHAIR—The other point I would make is that, in my experience, most of our overseas posts do keep a watching brief to some extent or other, depending on resources, on human rights abuses generally. The difficulty is often one of resources. In that sense, you are right, the government therefore has to make the commitment to provide extra resources.

Mr Doan—Another comment I will make about recommendation 6 is that, in parallel with our recommendation about setting up an advisory group, that group itself—

CHAIR—My next question was going to be on that advisory group.

Mr Doan—That group can formulate ideas to give to that dialogue about the task that it might want to handle.

Venerable Thich—I fully support that advisory group, either invited or appointed by the committee or by joint effort between the committee and DFAT—I do not know for sure what the structure is between the parliament and the government. That will be very helpful. There could be a lot of direct briefing, dialogue and information channelling between the communities, the concerned people and the committee itself, rather than holding an inquiry like this once in many years—

CHAIR—In fact, that does go on. This committee, quite apart from this inquiry, almost every week that we meet has somebody from outside coming along to brief us on particular issues. In fact, by coincidence, there is a gentleman in the audience here today who was with a group from Vietnam that came and briefed the committee yesterday, quite apart from this inquiry.

Venerable Thich—Yes, I know that.

CHAIR—We also yesterday had a briefing from people from Thailand on human rights issues. It is not unusual for us to get that ongoing briefing. This committee often, quite apart from its formal inquiries, writes to the minister or goes to DFAT to seek explanations or put forward ideas, so there actually is a fairly regular exchange. I am not arguing about how effective or ineffective it might be sometimes, but certainly it goes on, there is no question.

Venerable Thich—What happens with this recommendation of setting up a formal or, if you like, informal advisory group—does it become more regular?

Mr Doan—The idea is that that advisory group is advisory to the government, therefore it is a governmental body set up by the government, not by the parliament, and we believe that there should be community input to that.

CHAIR—Okay, that is fine. I am conscious that time is now marching on.

Senator HARRADINE—I was very interested in that table and recommendation 8, also on page 46. You note that influence in international multilateral entities is neither easy nor simple. How would you go about it? Your recommendation to the Australian government is to examine the issues of where and how it may introduce religious freedom to the agenda of multilateral entities, including the IMF, the World Bank and so on. What would you expect Australia to achieve in regard to that particular recommendation, and what would you hope those multinational entities could offer towards promoting human rights and religious freedoms?

Mr Doan—The starting point—

Senator HARRADINE—You put your finger on a problem, as I see it, and that is that the priority of religious freedom in multilateral organisations is very low.

Mr Doan—Yes. On the other hand, the potential to make a real difference there is very high if it happens because of the huge money and huge prestige involved. As to your question about what we might expect this recommendation to be able to achieve, my short answer to that would be very small steps at a time. The first step is to have our own group, the government's own deliberations, on whether we can do that, whether we should do that and, if so, how and when. So let us take that first step first, because without that nothing else will happen.

During that step alone the publicity that it generates may help to foster a debate in Australia and an increased awareness of lack of religious freedom and human rights around the world. That is a benefit that is achieved with this recommendation. If that working group, or whatever it is called, comes up with a final recommendation that, yes, we should take this matter to the international bodies, even if that recommendation is only to say that we should go to these meetings and say, 'We believe that this issue should be studied.' We are not asking the IMF to start using its money to do these things. We are saying that the IMF should set up a small group to study this question.

During the debate at the IMF or other organisations about that suggestion of Australia's, that debate itself would create some benefits by way of the debate. If that debate results in the actual formation of a group to study the question, then the deliberation by that group again will create benefits, and this time the deliberations by that group will be taken notice of by governments such as the one in Hanoi. As you can see, we are asking for things to be done one step at a time. It may take years.

CHAIR—Thank you. Unfortunately, we are running against the clock, as we inevitably seem to on these occasions, so I will draw it to a close there and thank you for coming to talk to us this morning. If there are any other matters on which we want to get additional information, the secretary will write to you.

Mr Doan—I would like, if I may, to make a very short closing statement on behalf of the VCA. In the course of the last hour or so we could sense that you are having some concerns about the practicality of implementing some of our recommendations. In the time available we may not be able to deal completely with those concerns, so we hope to have the opportunity to deal with that in writing later on via the secretary.

CHAIR—You have done fairly well. I think you need to understand that in this process the questioning tends to focus on things we are trying to draw out, rather than necessarily the areas where we would have common ground. On a lot of what you say we would agree with you 100 per cent, so it is pointless talking about that, and we are trying to draw out some of the particular issues. Do not walk away with the view, based on the nature of the questioning this morning, that we have formed a judgment; we are just trying to get more information.

Mr Doan—I understand.

Venerable Thich—I would like to say in conclusion that since 1986, when I started to work with a different chair and staff from DFAT and a different chair from this subcommittee, I have always found that people are very helpful and very concerned about our issues. We have achieved some small effect on the way we deal with a foreign government, particularly the one in Hanoi. But the serious problem is still there, it has become worse as we have watched, and the effort and the interest of the Australian government seem to me to have become not as high as in the past. We need to keep working together and we need to create more opportunity for the community and the parliamentary committee to keep in touch and to keep each other informed of the steps we are taking. Yes, something has happening, and we hope that, with this effort, we will produce a better situation for Vietnam and the millions of people in Vietnam. Thank you.

Mr Doan—On behalf of the VCA I would like to thank you, firstly, for the opportunity to be here today and, secondly, for your compliments on our submission.

CHAIR—Thank you very much indeed.

[10.33 a.m.]

BOUMA, Professor Gary, Professor of Sociology, Monash University

CHAIR—Welcome, Professor Bouma. It is nice to see you here this morning. The subcommittee prefers that all evidence be given in public, but should you at any stage wish to give your evidence in private, you may ask to do so and the committee will give consideration to your request. Although the committee does not require you to give evidence on oath, I should advise you that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and therefore have the same standing as proceedings of the houses themselves. I invite you to make an opening statement, and then we will move to questions.

Prof. Bouma—Thank you. It is a pleasure to be here, and it is also a pleasure to see religion being given an appropriate place on the agenda of the affairs of the nation. I am on record elsewhere as accusing Canberra of being a seething hotbed of secularity where these issues do not get aired. So it is a great pleasure this morning to see a serious concern for the religious dimensions of human rights and a serious effort being made to look at those and how Australia might, within DFAT, examine its role in promoting that. I laud that and applaud that.

Promoting religious harmony and addressing religious injustice are some of the most problematic issues of this century. I need not rehearse the history. It also raises problems of the conflict of values—ours versus theirs, universal versus local—and it gets to be quite fraught when we get going down that track. One of the things that I want to say this morning, in addition to the statement that you have already read I presume, concerns the extremely local nature of one dimension of religious intergroup relations.

We can talk about affairs of state, we can talk about national policies, but all of these things get worked out in very local situations which are highly nuanced. We have certainly seen that in Timor, the Balkans and elsewhere, where neighbours suddenly find themselves killing each other in ways that are pretty grisly—neighbours who lived together peaceably before that, in many cases for long periods of time. It is this profoundly nuanced nature of the local that also has to be addressed as we examine the ways in which religious difference works its way out and the ways in which people relate in particular societies. I have become much more alert to that, and that is where my work is going in the near future. At that point, I will stop and make myself available for questions.

CHAIR—Perhaps I could start off by exploring the concept of pursuing religious freedom and what Australia might do about that. Where do we draw the line between imposing our views on somebody else and respecting their views and their right to run their lives as they see fit?

Prof. Bouma—If I could draw that line, I would publish it and I would become very much in demand in speakers' circles around the world. It is that Solomonic wisdom of where you even comment. Do we comment about China? Is China in the region? I did not know whether China was in it. Do we comment on China's policy with regard to what seem to us to be highly innocuous groups? We do not even comment on that, whereas we might be more concerned in another situation where we could do something. So it is always tempered

by a pragmatic assessment of what we can do, what the effects of stepping in might be and what the effects of raising the issue might be—or making a comment or making it part of the discourse of the nation, as was proposed before. The line is very difficult. How do we distinguish our values from what some referred to as universal values? The United Nations has prepared a very helpful document, sometimes referred to as article 18, which Australia in its wisdom has seen fit not to adopt for its own local guidance and yet finds itself using to assess things in other nations. We could have that discussion within and without. We are sufficiently diverse within to understand diversity elsewhere. I think that is one of the strengths we have, and it may give us the ability to be nuanced in our judgments in other areas. I would hope that would be the case.

CHAIR—You have raised China as an example. Should we be raising with the Chinese government issues like Falun Gong, the official—as opposed to the underground—Catholic Church or the Protestant house churches?

Prof. Bouma—That would have to be weighed in the context of a prioritised national agenda of our dealings with China. That is certainly what has been going on. I understand that that is critiqued as being too pragmatic and that perhaps we should move to a more principled basis for dealing. Yes, we should make it known in general that we are concerned about these things. That alone is a step in the right direction: to say, 'These things are of concern to us.' But we may have this other discussion where they are not raised. Should we raise it? If we are going to raise human rights issues at all, this is a dimension of human rights and should be raised in that context. It is hard not to, but again it requires great wisdom to decide how and when and in what kind of situation to do it.

CHAIR—Could you comment on your view of the role of the Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance? Is it effective, is it ineffective? Should he function differently to the way he functions at the moment?

Prof. Bouma—My only dealing with him was to be interviewed by him a few years ago about the situation in Australia. His report on Australia was reasonably well informed and would be of help to those trying to promote freedom of religion and belief in Australia. I think that role is an important one and an important one to be played around the world. Beyond that, I have not much comment on how he plays it in other countries.

Senator HARRADINE—In your introductory remarks, you said that persons who have been living as neighbours for years could be thrown into conflict. I presume you meant interreligious conflict. Did you mention the Kosovars?

Prof. Bouma—I did mention Kosovo.

Senator HARRADINE—Is that essentially based on religious differences?

Prof. Bouma—The Kosovar conflict, as much of the Balkan conflict, is much more than religious. It would take a very narrow view to call it religious. On the other hand, there is a religious dimension. In postwar Yugoslavia, religious difference was declared to make no difference and that was enforced quite vigorously. It was when the imposed order of Tito began to come unstuck that some people began to use religious difference as a marker and as

a motivator for conflict to seek their own ends. It is in that kind of transition where some kinds of religious conflict can be seen to emerge. It is in that that often religion gets a very bad name. People before had been living quite peaceably together and interacting for at least the post-war period in Yugoslavia, and well before that religion had not made much difference to ordinary life. Then, all of a sudden, religion makes a difference; these divisions come, and it is very painful to see.

That is one of the situations where religion becomes a form of conflict and religious difference begins to make a difference. I fear that we see a bit of that in some of the territories in Indonesia where the imposition of Pancasila begins to come unstuck. Then, there appears to be a religious dimension between Muslim and Christian, which can be whipped up in a locality where before they had been living quite peaceably together. It is sad to see those situations unwind into conflict. It is not necessary to go that way, but it certainly has happened a number of times this century.

Once that happens, then of course you get a situation that is very hard to heal. You begin to get labels that become quite evident, and those divisions are very hard to overcome, even over generations. Fortunately, we in Australia have not gone down that path and therefore have a religiously plural society where religion has not made a difference, or much of a difference, for quite a long time. Where it did make a difference, it might have made a difference in which part of the Public Service you went into as opposed to whether you got into it at all.

CHAIR—I am sorry to interrupt but regarding your answer: were those divisions actually religious or were they ethnic?

Prof. Bouma—We would have to go into definitions of ethnicity. There may have been national, ethnic and religious differences, particularly if we are talking about the Balkans and the period post the collapse of Yugoslavia. Which bit of history you are rewriting to produce what kind of identity—either national, local or political—in order to promote the conflict are open to question. If those divisions overlap, you begin to get a stronger form of them. If they crosscut, then you can appeal to different kinds of issues to make the society weave together with difference. But to make the distinction between ethnic and religious is often extremely difficult.

CHAIR—I am not sure. For example, do the Serbs and Kosovars have different religions? I do not know.

Prof. Bouma—The Serbs were largely Christian and the Kosovars were largely Muslim.

CHAIR—Sorry, I did not mean to interrupt but I wanted to clarify that.

Senator HARRADINE—I heard your response to the chair when he raised the question as to whether these matters should be pursued with governments—for example, with China. But when we see religious persecution and denials of freedom of religion and belief, whether state initiated or just state sanctioned, are human rights likely to be affected? Which of those human rights are likely to be affected?

Prof. Bouma—If I hear your question correctly—where are the human rights violations in repression of religious freedom?—they could be everywhere from only the freedom to hold a belief to practising a religion. In some cases people are told you may not do or believe that, but there is nothing else in your life that that affects. That alone, according to the UN statements, would constitute a violation of a very fundamental human right. We usually become more concerned with that when they say not only, 'You may not do or believe that,' but 'We are likely to shoot you if you do,' or 'We're liable to deny you employment, access to health or whatever other services there are in society.' Then the other violations of basic human rights pile on top of each other because of one's association with a particular belief or religious practice. At the foundational level, I would argue that to deny someone the right to practise their religion and to hold their beliefs is a very foundational violation of basic human rights. Is that what you were asking?

Senator HARRADINE—Yes.

Prof. Bouma—That is why I think the whole effort here is a terribly important one, and to figure out how to develop policies, procedures and linkages which do those in a way that actually gets something done is important.

CHAIR—Given that you have said that, on the whole, we do it pretty well in this country, how do we therefore convey to other places that perhaps do not do it as well how they could improve and try to aspire to doing it the way we do it? Perhaps that is not the phraseology we would use, but how do we actually try to convey some of the good things elsewhere? Should our posts be more specifically reporting on religious freedom or be more active in a diplomatic sense, rather like the United States is? Should we have more bilateral dialogues on human rights, including freedom of religion and belief, or should we introduce conditionality on aid, as our previous witness was suggesting?

Prof. Bouma—In one sense, I could say yes to all of that, but I would also put the cautions in. You raised the issue of exporting what we do well. One of the ways we need to export what we do well is to take credit for what we do do well. One of the things that my research has certainly shown up is that Australia is outstanding in the world for managing a religiously plural society in a way that does not produce much conflict or in which conflict is usually ironed out in the courts and done very peacefully.

We need to take credit for that, and we need to talk about how we have done it. That can now be done as simply holding up an example so that if people say, 'Religion always leads to conflict. You can't have Muslims and Christians living in the same place without them tearing each other apart,' we say, 'Sorry, come look at us.' I think that is something that surprises even our English cousins, who have vastly more difficulty in this. We have a different history. The question is: aside from holding up our example and saying, 'Yes, it can be done,' you have to say, 'How can it be done?' Some of the stuff is exportable, and some of it is not. Our 200 years of history is not exportable. We just did not get around to killing each other on religion.

CHAIR—We did it on a different basis.

Prof. Bouma—A few different bases, but we have not had one of those major dividing events like the French and English in Canada or even the Maori and Pakeha in New Zealand. Our history on that is a bit darker on the one side and lighter on the other—grimmer and not so bad. But, in terms of religious diversity, we simply have a history that starts off with a low temperature religion. People came from late 18th century England, where nobody went to church and there was hardly any religion happening at all, and then religion came in with the 1840s revival of Christianity right around the world, whether the Oxford movement, the recatholicisation of Europe, et cetera. That becomes an overlay on the basic assumption about religion that it is low temperature, it is there and you take it seriously.

It is hard to export. You cannot export that history. We could export some of our organisational things, but it would be difficult. We are about the only society that funds independent schools out of the government purse. Britain opened its first Islamic school last January and was trumpeting, 'Isn't it wonderful? We've got a Muslim school. It's the first in the world.' I said, 'Sorry, we have been doing it.' They said, 'You have? How did you do it?' We did it with Menzies, who funded private, protestant and Catholic schools. From that accident has stemmed a wonderful thing. Muslims came here and said, 'How can we open our schools?' We said, 'Here is how you do it.' They asked, 'You mean we do not have to have a separate state?' We said no. How can you export that to the United States or Canada?

Senator HARRADINE—Would Mannix say it was an accident?

Prof. Bouma—Yes, but it was a wonderful one that has, in this sense, paid off. It is one of the most foundational planks in our multicultural society: 'You want to open a school? Here is how you do it.' We have to be careful about exporting what is good and we have to say that it is our values and not our social structures that have produced this. I think our values about religion being important but low temperature are values that we cannot export. But the other important things are structures that are in place and that have been working very well for us—and we would not want to tamper with those—but are hard to export.

The notion of saying, 'How can we help you?' could indicate a little bit too much national pride. It might be possible to open up the example and say, 'How can we stand alongside you, perhaps share some of our experience of living together and help you to see that it is possible—to be positive and to work towards something that you can come down and look at in Australia?' But to go in and say, 'We have got the solution' would be too arrogant.

CHAIR—Government actually needs to have some specific practical things to do. If we think it is something that government should be doing, what should it actually do? What recommendations do we make to government to say, 'These are practical things you can do or should do as a government to deal with this issue'?

Prof. Bouma—Particularly in terms of Foreign Affairs, our diplomats should know about the religious nature and plurality of Australia and how that is successful. Just knowing that and being sensitised to a religious dimension of life is important. Most of them were trained in a highly secular time, when religion was going to wobble away and not mean anything by the end of this century. We have discovered that religion at the end of the century means at least as much as it did at the beginning of the century in terms of any kind of global politics,

et cetera. Just building that into the in training, the in refresher courses or whatever else would be an important part.

There should be a variety of training programs for those involved in trade in nations around South-East Asia so that they are sensitised to issues of how one does business in a Muslim country—that you do not jack up about prayer times being required if you are going to open a business in Malaysia, or you will wind up in jail, as one of our businesspeople nearly did; that Monash University, when it opens a campus in Malaysia, is going to have to offer some subjects it did not offer in Clayton.

There should be awareness of what it means—that there are religious differences, these need to be sensitised, they are not going to go away and these countries are not going to become secular tomorrow. I think that kind of training within Foreign Affairs, and made available to our corporate sector as it goes overseas, would be valuable.

CHAIR—I think Foreign Affairs actually do quite a bit of that already. As an MP, for example, when I go to an overseas country, I get a briefing from Foreign Affairs and all of those sorts of issues are covered in the briefing. That happens automatically.

Prof. Bouma—They should also be aware of what is happening back home. That was the only thing—to hold that example up so it is a part of their brief. When I have visited embassies overseas I have not heard that as much, but I may have been asking the wrong questions. There is an important difference between having that somewhere as an official concern and that being something that has to be raised all the time. I think the existence of this committee makes that clear: that you might have some kind of declared intent within foreign policy, as opposed to everything simply being open to pragmatics, which would declare a trend or an issue. So people would know that, when dealing with Australia, we have these concerns.

CHAIR—What about the aid question? Do you see aid being conditional on certain human rights values?

Prof. Bouma—I think it is the wrong end to put it on. It may be a bit optimistic, but I think as we engage in more interchange of trade, culture, aid or whatever and thereby become part of the discourse of those nations, we have a context within which to speak. To go in and say, 'We will give you this if you do that,' is a bit blunt ended, but it may have to be done in some cases whether they be religious cases or something else. There is some aid that we give that certainly has these conditions.

CHAIR—We were not very conditional with Indonesia when we did all those nice things, and their behaviour in this respect has been a bit off recently.

Prof. Bouma—That is right, I agree. Whether the conditions would have made any difference, I do not know. Whether the fact that we have a certain level of trade and a certain level of aid and an awful lot of military liaison—as we have had in the past anyway—has made the transition easier or worse, I do not know. We will have to leave that to the historians. But I am not confident that putting those conditions on at the outset would help. Having that known as an issue and raising it within discussions or perhaps having other

associations which are more in the line of NGOs, et cetera—which will raise these issues, attend to them, participate in them and support them as Australian—may provide other avenues of discourse which are also effective.

CHAIR—Our previous witness was making the point that, for example, if we said that a small percentage of our aid to Vietnam would go to religious organisations, bodies and that sort of thing, it would bring out into the open the government's treatment of those churches and religions. Perhaps if the Vietnamese government agreed that the aid would go to support them, it would be a way of encouraging Vietnam to let the religions flourish rather than persecuting them. I am paraphrasing, but I think that was the general thinking.

Prof. Bouma—Isn't there a wonderful clause in our Constitution that says something about supporting religion?

CHAIR—I am asking for your reaction.

Prof. Bouma—I would say that, first of all, I think you might have some domestic troubles if it came out that our aid to Vietnam was being targeted—unless it was clearly for social service purposes, et cetera, and locally channelled through, as it might be, to the Brotherhood of St Laurence or something like that. If it were to support the organisation as a religion, I think we would have some very interesting speeches in the House. That is the distinction. If you want to direct it there—

CHAIR—I am not advocating one or the other; I am trying to draw out the conflicting views.

Senator HARRADINE—On page 1 of your submission, the third paragraph reads:

> Promoting freedom of religious practice and belief is difficult enough within one society, even within Multicultural Australia. The challenge of doing so beyond our borders is great indeed. . . . It is also impossible to remain neutral as inaction is tantamount to acceptance of conditions and situations many find unacceptable.

This is what I want a bit of clarification on:

> However, to act is often to seek to promote/impose a set of standards which are our standards on populations which do not share them.

Doesn't it go to the universality of the freedom of religion?

Prof. Bouma—I get queasy at the notions of universal values. They come easily—things like, it is better to live than to die, and there are some others—but when you start to decide which order you put them in or which ones come before which ones, then the possibility of conflict arises. For example, which is the more important value for the Chinese: economic development or human rights? If we say human rights before development and they say development before human rights, then we have a clash about not what is a value but the order of the values. It is in that sense that conflict comes out in that paragraph. If we went in and said, 'You have got to do human rights before you do economic development,' we would be imposing our values which might not be shared by either the government or the people. I think that is where these conflicts arise.

Senator HARRADINE—I heard the bosses say that plenty of times when I was in the trade union movement. They would say, for example, 'Don't go for this. We cannot erect those particular safety measures. We cannot pay that basic wage increase.' You have certain priority values, don't you?

Prof. Bouma—I am sure that I would and I suspect I would share them with you. We might be able to find sharing elsewhere, but even outfits as diverse as the United Nations, which come up with these things, are beginning to move towards some things which are looking universal. We have organisations to address those, and when human rights violations come up we have international organisations to refer them to. I think that is a good thing, but it is not necessarily shared at the local level, even within the unions or certainly amongst the bosses. I agree with you that you can say it is too much of a luxury at this point—that is always an argument—but the whole business of upon what standard to judge certain situations is not always clear.

Senator HARRADINE—You are not advocating, are you, by this last sentence that Australia should not raise violations of human rights and the right to freedom of religion and belief? You are just pointing out that these standards may not be shared by other states.

Prof. Bouma—That is right. We should certainly raise them because they are our standards and our standards are being violated. That is a good enough reason. What we do in another place may involve a whole lot more nuanced activity—waiting for invitations or referring to some other standard and hoping through discourse over a longer period of time that a more generally humane view would prevail. To go in and act in some way, either by tying our aid to certain criteria or attempting to impose by force—heaven forbid—certain kinds of things, then—

CHAIR—I do not think that is much of an option for the Australian government in the present—

Prof. Bouma—It is one we do not have—well, anyway, we will not talk about things just immediately north.

CHAIR—There is the argument, for example, when you say the Chinese perhaps are more focused on economic development and we are more focused on human rights, that we are arguing about the order rather than the intrinsic value. There is also a pragmatic view in terms of selling the human rights argument to the Chinese in that situation, because they need significant outside investment and expertise, and a lot of that investment and expertise would not be prepared to go and operate there unless there is the rule of law and those basic conditions applying. It would seem to me that is often quite a powerful argument to use with the Chinese and others who have a similar view.

Prof. Bouma—It could operate at the government level. It could also operate at a more local level where particular entrepreneurs go in and actually engage in providing a context within which certain human rights are observed within the control of that economic sphere, which are not necessarily outside, and provide a kind of example to the rest—which can be dangerous but which can also be informative and leading. One of the things we somehow got

rid of at the early part of this century was foot binding. I think we should look at how we got rid of foot binding.

CHAIR—You are not advocating they bring it back?

Prof. Bouma—No. But the process by which it was removed was a very interesting one and one which might be able to be taken over to other kinds of abuses. It is a very interesting story.

Senator HARRADINE—Could you elaborate?

Prof. Bouma—Because it was an elite practice, an agreement amongst the elite said that it simply would not be done. It was agreed that women whose feet were not bound would be marriageable, and it fell away. The precise story was quite interesting. I cannot go into the details at the moment, but the practice died in less than a generation.

CHAIR—Given that it was an elite thing, it therefore applied to a relatively small proportion of the population.

Prof. Bouma—It was a really sizeable proportion of the population. It was a practice that had profound consequences for the person.

CHAIR—I think one problem with human rights in a place like China is that even if you convince the ruling category of the country and appropriate laws are put in place, the actual implementation on a day-to-day basis is a whole new ball game with 1.3 billion people.

Prof. Bouma—Yes. Again, that raises the national or the local issue. There might be some areas where the local cadres are quite relaxed about it and provide a context wherein it can occur and others where the local cadres are so tightly tied to a Maoist anti-religion point of view that even the relaxations of the last 10 years have not hit. For the most part, relaxations have hit, but they have certainly been tightened up for the anniversary.

CHAIR—You mentioned earlier that, as we come to the end of the century, you thought there had been something of a revival in religion and that we have moved away from a trend toward secularism.

Prof. Bouma—Yes.

CHAIR—What do you see as lying behind that revival? If there is a revival in religious activity—and you were saying earlier that you saw that religious activity as being the cause of many of the conflicts—is it inevitable that there will continue to be more religious conflicts in the world? Will that grow and get worse?

Prof. Bouma—Religious practice, as a belief, certainly has not gone away as predicted.

Senator HARRADINE—H.G. Wells was wrong.

Prof. Bouma—H.G. Wells was wrong, Marx was wrong, Freud was wrong and most of the sociology taught in the 1960s was wrong on this issue. It looked for a while like religion was going to wobble off the scene in Australia. At the moment certain of our main outfits are showing signs of becoming quite geriatric, but in their place is coming a wide variety of religious practice.

One of the major current revivals, of course, is Islam. That revival is taking a variety of forms, including some fundamentalist forms which cause some concern, particularly in the area of freedom of religion and belief. But if you look at Latin America and Africa, there is vast growth and renewal within Christian churches as well. Whilst in the West there may be a staggering of some of the main old-line outfits, their place is being taken in part by a variety of new kinds of spiritualities which are much more diverse and less well organised. When they are more diverse and less well organised, they are less likely to lead to any kind of organised conflict.

But I do not think the association, particularly between Islam and certain states, will necessarily lead to conflict any greater than that which would have been predicted 20 years ago on the basis of the divisions—ethnic, economic or national—and the population pressures in particular regions like the Indian subcontinent and through South-East Asia. Particularly in Indonesia, and largely in Malaysia, the Muslim revitalisation movements are happening in ways which are not conducive to conflict but they are just simply strengthening the practice of that religion in those areas.

Senator HARRADINE—To follow up on the same subject, are you saying that there will be an increase in denials of freedom of religion and belief because there is an increase in the number of believers?

Prof. Bouma—I do not think so. The fundamentalists deny the right of other people to hold their beliefs. One of the planks of fundamentalism is that there is only one way of seeing the world: they see it that way and anybody who sees it another way is doing it wrong—

CHAIR—Some of us feel like that about football.

Prof. Bouma—Yes, I know. And we have found that is a pretty safe fundamentalism, although there has been some conflict and you would not want to go to a soccer match in England on the wrong day.

CHAIR—But I was right this year, because Norths won the premiership.

Prof. Bouma—If fundamentalist elements get hold of a nation, they last about as long as Cromwell, which was England's fundamentalist period, and we need to look at that and remind ourselves of that history. Even Iran is coming out of it in a number of ways, and it is part of a modernisation in process, if you look at the process the nation states go through. There may be some of this, but you have to look longer than two and three months. You need to look at about a 10-year cycle to see how it goes, if we are to understand nation state processes.

Fundamentalism would dominate about 10 places where there is a chance of that happening or where it is already happening and it is moving on. You need to be aware of those different kinds of situations, if you are trying to do foreign policy about freedom of religion and belief. You might be very concerned about a certain thing, but you may also have to say that they are at a particular point of development and stage within a religious life cycle in a nation, and that may mean that for a while there are going to be a variety of practices that make our hair fall out. But intervening at this point is unlikely to produce anything other than another Algeria, which we would not want to do. France tried to keep the fundamentalists at bay and produced a rather nasty situation, whereas if Algeria had been allowed to go the way of an Iran, it would probably be well on its way to being a fairly liberal, open, pluralist state at this time.

So you have to be careful about the nation state level of things and, then again, the local level, about how particular differences work out, even if various fundamentalists have fairly extreme religious beliefs. But, so long as they are not in control of local or national governments, it becomes a boutique kind of religion, a boutique expression which sounds extreme but has very little carry on into practice.

CHAIR—It gets a bit difficult when they are in control of the government—the Taliban in Afghanistan are a classic example. You talked about the fragmentation of religion. I think they are my words rather than yours, but I think that is what you meant. Would you include in that therefore this trend towards some of the cults that we have seen recently? Would you like to express a view on some of the mechanisms that have been put in place to monitor those cults? Why do cults seem to have grown so freely? Would you comment on the response to some of those cults in different countries, because clearly the response has been different in different places?

Prof. Bouma—Yes. Every age produces new religious ideas, movements and combinations of previous ones. The rate of production may be a little bit higher now, but it certainly has been going on through most of this century and well into the last. Most of them have a life expectancy of about two years and there are a few that live on beyond that.

Part of it is the reduced control. We have not had much religious control in Australia; therefore, we expect to produce some. We have basically imported them, however. We have hardly produced any at all. The United States, and California in particular, is good at producing cults. It is part of the new spirituality movement where people are happier to take on and formulate their own religious movements or to find something that is at variance with how they were raised.

Some of these are viewed as dangerous. There are some fairly basic rules about when they become dangerous. They become dangerous when they take on too much of an ‘us’ against ‘them’ perspective and begin sequestering members away from any reality checks with the outside world and begin closing in on themselves. There are two or three fairly basic rules that distinguish a cult that might become dangerous from one that is not.

Most cults are not worth watching. They are simply minor variations on some religious belief in practice. They may involve whole families and raising children, but it is hard to

differentiate what they do from certain other groups that we are not too worried about. In fact, differentiating cults from certain intense Protestant groups is almost impossible.

Some people watch cults very vigorously and they are very worried about them. These people tend to be most concerned to promote rationality. One of the interesting trends in our society has been away from the absolute devotion to rationality and toward the experiential. As we move toward the experiential, people say, 'That is not rational. It is dangerous.' So you will get people coming out of very Protestant or Jesuitical viewpoints that valorise the rational particularly, who get horrified by the exuberant, the charismatic, the Pentecostal, and this sort of stuff, and they begin to say that has to be squelched because it might subvert the rational. That is one of the dimensions in the anti-cult or the cult busters kind of movement that is a larger cultural stream where they represent an earlier form of devotion to the rational. Most of the exuberant stuff does not get out of hand. People get a nice sort of aerobic religious experience and go away feeling better, which is a nice thing to have happen after a religious ceremony.

In our cult watching, we have had the absolute debacle of the hauling of children from The Family and we hope we have learnt something about that. They may not do things that you would want to do, but do you find it abusive? Is it different from intense Protestant groups that send their kids to enclosed schools? Is it worse than the closed brethren that you talked about? There is a whole variety of existing patterns. It is a fraught area. Sometimes things get unstuck and occasionally you get those who become suicidal, and that always makes the papers. Usually, it is hard to prevent.

CHAIR—Earlier on, you were talking about promoting religious freedom—that it was a judgmental thing as to when you were publicly critical or when you went to another country and made proposals, and whatever. I was talking to you about China and some examples there. Effectively, you were saying it obviously depends on the situation. What sort of criteria should governments use in coming to those judgments?

Prof. Bouma—It is very close to your first question.

CHAIR—I know.

Prof. Bouma—I would love to be able to set it out. There might be some that you could—I suppose the extent of the violation, the intensity of violation. But, again, that is going to produce a comment and it will be an international kind of 'Oh my God, they are doing this there.' What do you use as criteria for judging that? We have not even thought about what actions might be taken. So to have a set of criteria that help you go from principle to action is always the problem.

CHAIR—That is what governments have to do—

Prof. Bouma—I am aware of that.

CHAIR—and that is what governments get criticised for doing.

Prof. Bouma—Absolutely. It is the sectarian mentality that says that we will hold fiercely to these principles and somehow rigidly impose them in particular ways. It is the pragmatic that says, 'Okay, these principles are important. How do we work towards them in given situations?' In that wisdom of sizing up the event and making a judgment and saying, 'We tried,' as I said at the outset, now there is the intent to pay attention to this and to be deliberate about it in some way and perhaps report back on an effort which, after some 25 years, might result in a very useful book that has some criteria. Until there have been some attempts to move, the criteria are almost as ideal as the principles upon which they are supposed to apply.

Senator HARRADINE—When you are talking about imposing our views, surely we are not upholding the principle of religious freedom, belief and practice and surely when we are raising violations of that principle around the world—whether it be in China or anywhere else—we are not imposing our view. Surely we are upholding the human rights of ordinary people in these countries—as in China. Surely we should not deny those people freedom of their human spirit just because the PRC says, 'We need to have economic and social rights before we have religious rights.'

Prof. Bouma—You shifted in your statement. I agreed with the first half, which was that if you see such things you call them what you see them to be, which is a denial of human rights.

Senator HARRADINE—Yes.

Prof. Bouma—Then you shifted into a position where we should not let that go on, which suggests a set of actions. The first is an action and I think that is important. It is an action to say, 'That is a violation. That offends our standards. That offends the standards as put out by the United Nations.'

Senator HARRADINE—Yes.

Prof. Bouma—That is an action perhaps which has not been taken so far and that, in itself, is important. There might be other actions which are more active, like reducing trade or aid or trying to do something else all the way down to sending an army up to save Tibet. If you wanted to take an extreme range of actions, I think one of the utilities is to say that this is a range of actions which can be taken. As Australia, we have actually done these historically. We might not move all the way down to that because as we move beyond certain points in certain circumstances we do more ill than we might possibly achieve. In your statement you started off with: here is a violation and we cannot let that go unnoticed or undeclared as a violation. I fully agree. What you do beyond that becomes much more problematic.

Senator HARRADINE—But as human beings we have this big challenge, an enormous challenge from evidence that is coming before us and elsewhere. You have mentioned that daily we are confronted with violations of human rights. That is a challenge and for every challenge you need a response. You need values and you need organisations. The values are set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and you need organisations. If we have only values it is academic—

Prof. Bouma—Correct.

Senator HARRADINE—and if you have only organisations it is downright dangerous. You are not suggesting, are you, that we should not raise with the governments these violations of human rights in the PRC or in Vietnam and then take some sorts of steps?

Prof. Bouma—What I am saying is that just raising it is taking the step, and I think we need to give ourselves credit for taking that step. Sometimes even that step is not taken, for very good reasons. That is the problem. The Queen did not raise with Jiang Zemin the issue of human rights in China when he was having dinner at Buckingham Palace. We can pretty well assume that they did not talk about that over the teacups.

CHAIR—But John Howard did.

Prof. Bouma—Yes.

CHAIR—That was the basis, in fact, of setting up the dialogue between the two countries.

Prof. Bouma—Okay. If that mention of it had an outcome of certain dialogue, then that can be put in place as an example of an action taken beyond simply raising the matter and having an outcome, which is what this policy has been working towards.

CHAIR—Just for the record, when I met Jiang Zemin last month I raised the subject of freedom of religion in Tibet, but I have to admit that I did not get around to talking about Vietnam, because I did not have time.

Prof. Bouma—I am not suggesting for a minute that we do not, but I am saying that it is highly nuanced. But the judgments and the criteria, I am sorry, I cannot give you.

CHAIR—The clock is moving on inexorably, unfortunately. Thank you, Professor Bouma, for coming to talk to us today.

Prof. Bouma—Thank you.

[11.33 a.m.]

HURLOCK, Mr Brian John (Private capacity)

CHAIR—On behalf of the subcommittee, welcome. The subcommittee prefers that all evidence be given in public but should you at any stage wish to give evidence in private you may ask to do so and the subcommittee will give consideration to your request. Although the subcommittee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and therefore have the same standing as proceedings of the House itself. I now invite you to make an opening statement and we will then proceed to questions.

Mr Hurlock—Thank you, Mr Chairman. I am somewhat overawed by the standard of the submissions already by very professional people. Mine is very much just a voice from the grassroots but based on fairly extensive experience in South-East Asia.

My attention was first drawn to your advertisement in the paper in May because of the human rights content, then because of the comment about protection of religious rights, but possibly more so because of the word 'beliefs'.

Just as a little background to explain why a nonentity like me might have the temerity to hit you with some of my philosophy: from 1985 to 1993 I worked on the Cambodian-Thai border in refugee camps with mainly Cambodian people but also with Vietnamese people. From 1989 to 1993, I helped the Cambodian people in the camp to form a human rights organisation, which we called the Charter 89 Society. You would be well aware of the Czechoslovakian Charter 77, and I used that to try to explain to them some of the basics of human rights.

Senator HARRADINE—What was significant about 1989?

Mr Hurlock—We formed it in 1989. I am trying to keep it alive because it is now unique and no-one else can copy that name. For me, it was a life-changing experience. I could talk forever about it, but I will not, unless it is in answer to a question. But it has also governed my life since I returned to Australia. I became interested in the antipersonnel land mines campaign; I am a member of the Australia-East Timor Association, the Australia-Burma Association, Amnesty International and many other volunteer organisations. This is all stemming back to that period I had working with people and the interest I then took in human rights as a subject.

CHAIR—And the Burmese had the 8/8/88 riots?

Mr Hurlock—Yes.

CHAIR—That is significant in that context.

Mr Hurlock—There is a story I could tell about meeting the students shortly after that, but I will not bore you with that at the moment. Getting towards the end of my time in Thailand, we were going through a period of fairly low morale on the border. Some things

were not going as they should with the repatriation. Some of us had been talking about our experiences over the years, and we wondered why such a loving, affectionate people as the Khmer could do such terrible things to each other. They seemed as though they could change in an instant, and they could do such terrible things to each other, to animals and even to children.

On a particular Sunday, I was listening to Radio Australia and there was an interviewer who is quite well known down here, Terry Lane. He was interviewing an author who had recently written a book about her version of what the life of Jesus Christ might have been—as an ordinary man, a teacher and a philosopher, not necessarily associated with a God or a spiritual side of life. It was at about that stage in life—while I was pondering those things—that I came to the realisation that I was prepared to openly say that I had become a non-believer, or what people might call an atheist or, as my Chinese friends began to tell me, a freethinker.

I wrote a letter to Terry to put down a lot of these things. Terry's reply said that it was amazing that, at the time he got my letter, he had just released a book. It was called *God: the interview*. It was a tongue-in-cheek effort where Terry purported to be interviewing God, who said that she did not want to be bothered with all these problems, that we are really on our own and that we have to find our own way in life.

I also reflected at that stage—and I put this into the letter to Terry—that, with the Khmer culture being so imbued with a Buddhist culture and being a Buddhist society, perhaps they believed some things, such as the inequality of women in their society and their society not having so much respect for human life—or, at that time, for people with war or landmine injuries—were the result of bad karma from a previous life. Suddenly, I thought, that is perhaps why those people do not have as much regard for other people's lives as do people from other societies. I am glad to say that, during my time there with our involvement in human rights teachings, we could see that even some of the venerable monks were starting to say that they needed to change their teachings and change their attitudes, particularly towards the equality of women.

That is why I decided, when I saw your advertisement, that I really did want to have my small say, especially in relation to protection of religion and protection of beliefs, and because I believe that, whenever we are talking about that, we should also be making reference to people who have no religion or who have no particular beliefs.

I have made a couple of other points in my submission. I said that we should pursue further, and well into the future, a more distinct separation of state from religion. And there is a need for more promotion and education in relation to human rights in general and, in this case, the provisions of section 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which do promote the protection of the rights of people to change religions but should also make a specific mention of the right not to have a religion, in my opinion. Of even more significance, to my mind, in this regard is the right to freedom of thought and conscience.

Finally, I mentioned the need to encourage complete equality for women throughout the world, particularly in developing countries, which in many cases are denying 50 per cent of

their potential at a time when they are also relying on foreign aid and spending what may be large amounts on military armaments, et cetera. I also believe there is a definite need to make greater efforts to educate those countries that it is truly a crime against humanity to continue the practices of female circumcision. From my relationship with the AMES people down here—that is the Adult Migrant Education Service—we have come into contact with many people from the African countries. From those contacts and from my readings, I suspect that there is a danger that some of that is still going on in Australia or that people are still prepared to do those things to their own daughters, so there is a need to concentrate on that. I think that is enough from the submission.

CHAIR—In your submission you suggest that:

Religious fanatics and fundamentalists will increasingly be the cause of major division and conflagrations throughout the world, to the extent that they will again be major threats to world peace itself.

Can you elaborate on what you mean by that and on your reasons for believing that to be the case?

Mr Hurlock—Yes. It has very much to do with what many of us have predicted will be a major cause of conflagration in the next 50 years, and that is the clash between mainly Muslim fundamentalists and other religions. I suppose the Christian religions and/or the Western way of life, Western civilisation, are seen as their main protagonists. I believe there is plenty of evidence of that already in places, as has been discussed earlier, such as Bosnia and Kosovo; there are elements of that in the strife in Indonesia—although there are other political and corruption reasons why that has happened, there is a religious undercurrent there; in Afghanistan; and in the growing danger of conflict between India and Pakistan who now, of course, have access to nuclear weapons. So I have no doubts that it is a great danger if people are not taking action through, say, human rights avenues to try and ameliorate those problem areas.

CHAIR—In addition to the growth of religious fanatics, as you call them, what about the growth of sects and cults—do you have any views on those? Do you think those groups are gaining in popularity and, if so, what do you think lies behind that growth?

Mr Hurlock—I had not given them any particular thought for this submission. However, from what I have heard earlier today, I do believe there is a growth in sects and that they are a problem. I do not see them as as big a threat as I believe this other global threat—clashes of religious fundamentalists—would be. Internally within countries, yes, it is becoming a threat. But the internal aspects of it are probably more easily controlled by, and probably are more the domain of, governments—apart from, of course, where you have people blowing up buildings and embassies. I still see that more in the camp of fundamentalist religion rather than the sects.

CHAIR—Let us take the example of the Falan Gong, which is both in Australia and in China. We have taken no government action at all against the Falan Gong as an organisation. If a member of that grouping went out and committed an act such as killing somebody or burning something, we would treat it as a criminal act the same as we would if they were Catholic or if they had no religion at all. Yet, in China, the government has moved against

them on the basis that they thought they were a dangerous sect. What is your view of how the Falan Gong should be treated? Have we got it right or have the Chinese got it right? If you believe that sects are going to cause a bit of trouble, shouldn't we be moving against them in this country?

Mr Hurlock—In the few nanoseconds I have had to think about that, I would say that we should concentrate on pursuing their criminal acts in Australia. I think I said in my submission that, if a religious group or sect were not breaking laws, under the provisions of article 18 we should not move against particular sects just on reputation. In my opinion, it would very much be determined by their behaviour in our country.

CHAIR—In your submission, you suggest that the committee should discuss the meaning of the term 'separation of the government and church (religion)'. What does that separation mean to you?

Mr Hurlock—It means having a truly secular government and state in which eventually there may not even be any mention of our particular God or Christian philosophy in terms of religion but a total separation of government and religion. Through human rights agencies and fora, we are very much in favour of the protection of people's rights to practise their religion and beliefs. But in no way could it be confused that we are any longer representing more a Christian faith or a Christian religion. Of course we follow some of the wonderful and required teachings of the Christian faith, as you will find most of those same basic and fundamental beliefs in Muslim, Hindu and Buddhist philosophies and religions. What I think I am saying is that we should pursue human rights avenues more and completely separate any thought that the government represents one particular philosophy, because we are now such a multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious society.

CHAIR—On page 2 of your submission, you say that some churches are trying to recover power and influence by becoming more political in their activities. Are you suggesting that churches should always be silent and that any role they exercise in promoting, say, social justice issues is inappropriate or motivated by a search for power?

Mr Hurlock—My observation is that I believe some are becoming too involved and I believe that that, in turn, represents a danger to their own flock because, whilst it is okay to talk about social values and perhaps even what they might think is abuse by governments in not giving enough money to certain things, once they start being possibly perceived as more on one ideological side of things than the other they run the risk of losing some of their own flock who may subscribe to that particular religion.

CHAIR—But that is a matter of judgment for them.

Mr Hurlock—It is a matter of judgment for them, but I have perceived in recent years that there has been a move towards more involvement by the religious people in openly political things, and I do believe it creates a danger. Their religion or their organisation could well rely on other spokespersons to be pushing those arguments. I see it as a danger. As an ex-Presbyterian, I definitely see the Uniting Church as one that is representing very much one side of the political divide.

CHAIR—I think Bronwyn Pike was the social justice spokesperson for the Catholic Church. She has just become a minister in the new Victorian state government. Very interesting.

Mr Hurlock—Very interesting, yes.

Senator HARRADINE—Don't you think there is separation of church and state in Australia to the benefit of both? I might say I agree that there should be a separation of church and state. How is there not in Australia?

Mr Hurlock—To a certain extent of course there is. That is one of the strengths of our society. But it is my belief that in future there is a need for an even more definite distinction. For instance, there are references to God, who was and is our Christian God, or was originally—it can now be interpreted, I am sure, as a Muslim God or anyone else's God. I know if I appear before any official bodies I usually take an affirmation; that is my particular way of doing things and I am in favour of that. During the talk about the first try at a preamble, there was a lot of reference to the question of whether there should be a reference to God in there at all.

There is still a big involvement with governments and church run schools. As I said in my submission, there is no way that governments could not support church run schools at the moment, and some of our best schools are church run schools. But that is one area where I believe that in future there should be a bigger separation of institutions of education from the institution of their church. I do see a link between—

CHAIR—Are you actually saying there should not be religious schools?

Mr Hurlock—Not 'in' the schools. If churches were to run schools into the future, as they will do, but I mean well into the future, I would believe that the church component, the religious component, of the schools should be outside the school environment. There should be no hint that part of the education process is keeping or recruiting people to that particular religion.

CHAIR—Why would a religious organisation run a school if it is not allowed to teach its religion in that school?

Mr Hurlock—That is one of the points I make—why can't we do things that are good and proper for humanity in the name of humanity rather than in the name of a particular religion?

CHAIR—Isn't one of the basic human rights the freedom to have some choice?

Mr Hurlock—Oh yes, and I am not suggesting for one moment that we do not have that choice, but I am saying that, in terms of separating government completely, I would see at some future time it is something that could come up for review—that is, in terms of government funding—whether it is proper for government to be funding schools that are also involved with religion in the school. But your point is well made that, no, there is no hint that we should be using that to say that there should no religious teachings.

Senator HARRADINE—I was rather intrigued by a comment that you made that all the good aspects of religious teaching are the result of human concepts. Do you believe that individual human beings are prone to perfection, in other words? You have been around for a few years.

Mr Hurlock—No, not at all, but what I am saying is I believe that what humans do that is good should be credited to humanity, humans, rather than, as might have more the case in the past, that it might have been more related to their religious beliefs or that somehow they were inspired by some particular religious philosophy. My belief, for what it is worth, is that people should get the full credit for the good that they do as human beings just as, of course, we must also shoulder the responsibility for the evil that we do, for the bad things that we do. But for me personally—although I do not proselytise this in any way, I do not push my particular beliefs on people with religious beliefs—my belief is that the person or the people themselves should get full credit for the good they do and take responsibility for the bad that they do.

Senator HARRADINE—We will just take the example of East Timor. You have seen the brutal deaths of a number of religious people and priests in that area, none of whom would be wanting to take credit themselves for giving their lives for their fellow human beings. They would have been inspired to do that through the example and teachings of Jesus Christ in a Christian sense. I am trying to get to see your concept. If humans are left to their own devices—in other words, that they do not acknowledge a creator, and I am talking about governments—if national governments do not acknowledge that they are answerable for what they do to their citizens, not just to themselves but to a supreme being, don't you think that that would lead to more dictatorships in the world? You have got China, for example, at the present moment.

Mr Hurlock—Yes, but not for that reason. As to your first point about East Timor, I believe it was the very basic drive for freedom, but I must say that I admire greatly the faith that kept those people together. That is a fact of life, and I do not argue with that, and I admire and I respect that. But, the one driving thing—and I am sure there were some people there who were not of the majority religion—those people were combined in that basic human requirement for freedom. So I cannot see a mixing of those two facts there. But, as I said, I admire greatly the strength that the people got from their religion, and that has to be acknowledged. But, on the other side, no, I do not see a need to keep giving credit, if you like, to religious philosophy or to spiritual concepts.

I come back to what I said: 'Why can't we do exactly the same things, good things, in the name of what we are—humanity. Why do we have to keep giving credit for the good things of life to something which an increasing number of people find hard to believe in or have faith in?'

Senator HARRADINE—You are entitled to that view. It is even in accordance with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It does get down to conscience, as you say in your document. When I say it does get down to conscience, freedom of belief is one thing also that we are looking at. But what about what all of those people that are incarcerated because of the denial of their rights to freedom of religion?

Mr Hurlock—I condemn that. As a human rights activist, I condemn that. Of course I do.

Senator HARRADINE—What sort of priorities do you consider that the government should give to that?

Mr Hurlock—I appreciate the problems that governments and diplomats must have and how far you can push these particular things. From my readings and from following debates, I know there are very fine people on these committees that go overseas, and you have spoken of some of your efforts. I am one who is definitely in favour of our increasingly raising these issues—although I appreciate that you cannot raise them to the point where they become self-defeating and governments will not talk to you. You cannot endanger the lives of other people. This is why I was so impressed by what I heard from our Vietnamese friends in their submission, that they are trying to get across to government—as I have tried to get across to government in other committee hearings on Thailand, et cetera—how much there is a need for government agencies to liaise with grassroots organisations, NGOs and so on. Very often, in government to government relationships, people are told what the other government believes you want to hear so that there will be more trade and there will be more foreign aid, et cetera. Something that I have heard here today and something that I would like to also support is the suggestion that there be more dialogue between our government and non-government groups both in the countries in which we are trying to help, such as China, and also with people here in Australia who can act as liaison between those people.

It is a point that I have tried to make very strongly in submissions and letters, that there are two different worlds. There are those worlds where governments meet and there is what is going on underneath. There are huge developments going on in all of the countries of South-East Asia and, I believe, in China, where people really are getting in tune with universal human rights values—part of which is protection of religion, of course. I do not argue with that. I am not trying to argue against that.

Senator HARRADINE—I understand.

CHAIR—You talked in your submission about equality for women, particularly in relation to religious organisations and their treatment of women. Do you think there have been any improvements in religious organisations regarding the treatment of women? If not, what do you see are the major results of the gender inequality?

Mr Hurlock—I saw direct results beginning to happen, as I said, in the strongly Buddhist philosophy and culture in Thailand and Cambodia.

Once the Sangha was responsive to letting their monks study more and go to seminars on human rights, then, I found from talking to some of the senior members of the hierarchy, particularly the Cambodian hierarchy, they themselves started to express a little bit of embarrassment about what had happened over the past centuries. They believe that they should be moving more towards a type of equality for women. They were not yet at that stage where they were prepared to promote the full enlightenment of women as monks, the same as men could be, but even in Thailand there were a couple of wats that were starting to

let women practice as full monks. So it was starting to happen, but we are hoping to see changes in philosophies and religions that have been going for a millennia or more, so of course the process is going to be slow.

That is another reason I wanted to make a submission to a human rights subcommittee, because I strongly believe that it is through human rights involvement and teachings that governments have a non-religious or areligious way of trying to influence these countries without insulting their religion and without putting too much pressure on them. Change will be slow, unfortunately, but I do see the changes. The results were very obvious in the lack of education for girls. As I said, they just were not treated as equals within the religious organisations. One of the things that women often hoped was that they would be born again as a man so that they could have a better life. This was the philosophy of women in refugee camps who had been brought up in a Buddhist culture.

CHAIR—Under what you are proposing, are you suggesting the government in this country should take some action to require the church to allow women to be ordained?

Mr Hurlock—I did not have the temerity to suggest that, but my personal feeling is that I feel very sad to see any church organisation that has not yet reached the stage where they will allow women to be ordained.

CHAIR—Are you suggesting government should take some action there?

Mr Hurlock—No. I do not think there is anything in my submission that suggested governments should be taking positive action. There is too much danger involved. That goes right against—

CHAIR—I was going to say that was contrary to your other concept of separating church and state.

Mr Hurlock—No, I do not think so. I think you are getting more involved in the actual running of a religious organisation if you say that the state should get involved. That is the opposite direction from what I am saying. If there are aspects of a particular religion which upset some antidiscrimination bill, for instance, if it got to that stage, I would say that there are human rights committees or there are organisations through which the government should work, but I am not suggesting for one moment that we get to the stage where a government should condemn a religion in Australia unless, as I said in my submission, they are breaking some law or doing something that is terribly wrong in terms of legality. I believe that at some time—I will not see it, but in 50 years or 80 years—these religious organisations will ordain women. I am not saying, and I did not suggest, that governments should be trying to influence that directly.

CHAIR—In your recommendations generally I think you tend to point to actions for government. What would your view be about potential roles in the human rights area and the freedom of religion area for NGOs, non-government organisations? Do they have a role, should they take a major role, or should governments be playing the major role?

Mr Hurlock—Religious NGOs or NGOs in general?

CHAIR—Any NGOs.

Mr Hurlock—No. Since my experiences in South-East Asia and since my involvement with human rights I have been saying that I believe there has to be a greater involvement between government agencies and NGOs. Even in UN circles I was saying this. I do not think I would find much argument that the UN are top heavy with bureaucracy, nepotism, corruption and inefficiency. For their salvation, because we still need an efficient UN, one way that they might see their way forward is to restructure so that more of the actual work is done by NGOs on the ground and then liaising through perhaps US Aid or AusAID or ACFOA to governments.

Senator HARRADINE—You mentioned education being a very major implement, I suppose, for the raising of the status of women. Are you aware of the contribution made to that effort by the churches, in particular, for example, the Catholic Church? Are you aware at all of the actual physical involvement as well as personnel involved in the teaching of girls to raise the status of women?

Mr Hurlock—Yes.

Senator HARRADINE—Very substantial?

Mr Hurlock—Yes. I am not directly involved, but I applaud that. I would like to think that there was a concept at some far distant future time that people would still do that in the name of humanity as much as they would want to do it in the name of a particular religious philosophy. I have no problems with that and I admire that greatly. The more that that is done by all sorts of organisations the better. I have no argument there, and I am not criticising it.

Senator HARRADINE—I just asked that question because in your submission there seemed to be an underlying message coming across that religion in general meant suppression of the status of women.

Mr Hurlock—No, I mentioned things that I had had contact with and could comment on, but I do not think I implied that in any way about any other religion apart from that which I had close contact with.

Senator HARRADINE—I accept that.

Mr Hurlock—As I said here, I have immense hope for the future because I can see changes coming, but of course they will be very slow. The more we can do through human rights agencies the better it will be, and I think it will be appreciated, especially by the women in those countries.

Senator HARRADINE—Yes, I must have misread it, particularly D.

Mr Hurlock—I could understand how you could get that impression, especially as I have spoken about some religious organisations which I might interpret as being maybe a bit more authoritarian than others. But that is purely a personal view and I did not mean to—

Senator HARRADINE—No. Thank you.

CHAIR—Mr Hurlock, thank you for coming and talking to us today. If there are any other matters we think about afterwards that we want to talk to you about the secretary will write to you to ask for that further information. Again, thank you very much for coming.

Mr Hurlock—Thank you for listening.

Proceedings suspended from 1.14 p.m. to 1.48 p.m.

CURTIS, Mr Ian Sidney, National Director, World Vision Azerbaijan

GWYNNE, Ms Beris, Group Executive, International and Indigenous Programs, World Vision Australia

THOMPSON, Mr Gregory Fredrick, Manager, Policy and Advocacy, World Vision Australia

CHAIR—Welcome. The subcommittee prefers that all evidence be given in public, but should you at any stage wish to give evidence in private you may ask to do so and the subcommittee will give consideration to your request. Although the subcommittee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and therefore have the same standing as proceedings of the House itself. I invite you to make an opening statement and then we will move to questions.

Ms Gwynne—First, I would like to give our thanks for the opportunity to provide further elaboration on our written submission to this inquiry. By way of introductory remarks I would just like to mention that, in our view, from the beginnings of time human civilisation has been founded on fundamental values and principles of human behaviour. We believe, as a Christian non-government organisation, that these values and principles are essential to our successful living together as societies in the world. We are very much concerned to see the Australian government also invest in the promotion of protection of the fundamental right to freedom of religion and belief.

The issue is very complex. We do not pretend in a brief submission or even in our answers to questions that these are simple issues. We are convinced that there is a relationship between the exercise of fundamental human rights—including the freedom of religion and belief—and poverty, justice and conflict. We see the results of the lack of the observance of those freedoms in much of our work here in Australia and around the world. Within the Australian context, ours is a fairly secular society. Our parliamentary tradition is one which separates the role of church and state. We in World Vision Australia believe the support for our work around the world to promote a world which will not tolerate poverty and injustice has to rely on people accepting these fundamental values or principles of human rights, which are under discussion today.

There are both domestic and international implications. With your permission, I would like to invite Greg to make some brief comments about how we see the broader human rights framework, and Ian and I between us will make very brief reference to the international work which we as World Vision representatives see in our operations.

Mr Thompson—I also am delighted to be able to appear before the subcommittee and to support the written submission. In doing that, as Beris has suggested, I would just like to draw attention to the way our submission recognises the basic frameworks that exist within international human rights instruments. They include, from the beginning, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which recognises the right to freedom of religion and belief as fundamental to the full exercise of human rights, and a further elaboration of that is contained in the covenants and is also in the UN General Assembly's 1981 Declaration on

the Elimination of all Forms of Intolerance and of Discrimination based on Religion and Belief.

We note that those instruments have been developed and institutions developed for implementation. Oversight of the exercise of those fundamental rights are pursued within the UN itself through the UN Commission on Human Rights and its instruments, including the Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance, who visited Australia in 1997. In his report of that visit, which we drew attention to in the submission, he underlined the significant role that Australia has to play within the international community by demonstrating the ways in which religious tolerance, as part of a full expression of our multicultural society, might provide a standard by which that right and tolerance might be exercised in other places. So Australia has a role to play in ensuring the realisation of this right to religion and belief by demonstrating what we do within our own society. I think that is a challenge, as well as an opportunity, for us.

We also recognise that, as well as those UN instruments, the United States has recently established the office of Ambassador-at-Large on Religion and Freedom, which is held by Dr Robert Seiple who was formerly the President of World Vision US. So we have a former colleague in that particular office who is able to exercise further expression in this particular role. I think the importance of that role, in not only pursuing the interests of the United States but also providing information on the extent of freedom of religion and belief, is not realised in particular contexts. So we drew attention to the work of Dr Robert Seiple and encouraged the Australian government—as it undoubtedly will do—to use that particular work and the resources that are available there whilst recognising the particular Australian flavour that must accompany that.

We believe that there could be a further development of institutions in Australia and the use of particular opportunities to promote freedom of religion and belief. We note, for example, the opportunities through forthcoming events such as the International Year of the Culture of Peace next year and the following year of dialogue between civilisations. The Third World Conference on Racism is a further opportunity through which Australia can learn and also contribute to international understanding of ways in which to secure the right to freedom of religion and belief.

We also note that, given the significant role that religion plays in many societies under pressure from globalisation and in a post Cold War situation in many circumstances, there are some pressures on the realisation of the right to freedom of religion and belief in particular contexts. Sometimes that also results in conflict. On the other side of the coin, as well as contributing to the conflict, recognition of the role that religion and religious leaders might play in resolution of conflict is important. We drew attention to that in particular circumstances.

But we also recognise that, through our aid program, particularly where World Vision Australia has a particular role to play, there are opportunities through which to secure the full realisation of human rights, as the minister underlined in his parliamentary statement last year, drawing attention to six principles of human rights. We would invite the committee to consider recommending the particular pursuit of the promotion of religious freedom and belief in particular circumstances, given the recognition that the fullness of practice of

religion and belief in particular circumstances can contribute to the realisation of other rights, including the right to development, which can be supported through the aid program.

This is consistent with UN institutions concerned about human development such as the World Bank and the United Nations Development Program, both of whom have recognised the significance of religion in particular societies by establishing and supporting efforts by religious communities through, for example, the World Bank's support of the World Faiths Development Dialogue, an interfaith grouping of people from different communities who are pursuing dialogue with the World Bank about the ways in which programs acting against poverty might be undertaken.

I want to underline that these institutions, and the instruments are there. There is a challenge for Australia as well as an opportunity in pursuing these things in the use of those instruments and the institutions that we have available.

Ms Gwynne—I emphasise that, while World Vision Australia is a Christian relief and development organisation, we are not church or para-church. The principal voice which we seek to bring to these discussions is on the basis of our experience in our relief and development work around the world. That experience leads us to emphasise that freedoms are always exercised in the context of others' rights. When we speak of freedom of religion and belief we are not referring only to the freedom for Christians to practise, but for the freedom of all who are engaged in religions which do not impinge on others' rights in the process of that exercise.

The two main areas where we speak, we believe, from our field experience are in terms of the relationship with poverty, injustice and conflict, which I mentioned previously, where religion can be both a cause but at the same time a means of solving or easing some of the difficulties faced. There are many examples in the world in which we operate where, although we as Australians often approach these situations from a secular point of view, the daily practice of religion and religious belief is actually a critically important element for the societies or communities in which we work.

We have been pleased that in recent times, in discussion with AusAID, non-government organisations have been able to emphasise, as Greg mentioned, the importance of religion in many of the societies in which we work and the related need for NGO workers for governments to recognise that connection in the design and delivery of international aid programs. I draw particular attention to the need for work in conflict prevention and in reconciliation and peace building where conflict has taken place. We are again working across so-called religious boundaries with people of different faiths. We have been able to make, we believe, a significant contribution in these two areas.

The second area which we believe would be of significant interest to the Australian government is in connection with the building of civil society and democratisation. With that introduction I would like to ask Ian Curtis to comment on the particular experiences which he has faced in Azerbaijan.

Mr Curtis—Mr Chairman, I would like to give a contemporary example of the complexity of this question but, given that I do have some intelligence information here that

is not generally available, I would be grateful if it could be considered as a private submission.

Evidence was then taken in camera, but later resumed in public—

CHAIR—Is there anything else you want to say or shall we move to questions? My first question is this: with religious intolerance, which has been part of the world scene for a long time, there have been suggestions that violations of religious freedoms have grown markedly in the last decade or so. Would you agree with that and, if so, why do you think that has happened?

Ms Gwynne—This brings us back, I think, to one of the issues which I touched upon briefly, which is that of definitions. We have certainly had the impression from our recent work that there are many more regional or internal conflict situations where ethnic and religious elements are named as principles involved in the conflict situation. Our analysis of that has been that, one, we are all hearing more about things that are going on in various parts of the world, particularly with the change in the geopolitical balance internationally. These things may well have been going on in earlier times but we were not aware of them—the CNN factor, et cetera.

The second part of our analysis has indicated that there are times when conflicts are in fact not about religion but religion becomes the vanguard, if you like, because it characterises groups of people who have traditionally fought over land or who have juggled for power. As we see, certainly in areas of poverty, the increasing poverty in parts of Asia and Africa has meant that groups which have lived side by side without religious intolerance for some time are now competing for resources and that they themselves, or sometimes outside parties, name religion as a cause rather than just a characteristic of the two alignments.

I wonder whether either Greg or Ian might want to comment. We have been looking particularly at Indonesia and at developments there because it is very easy and it was the case that some people tried to characterise the East Timor situation as a religious issue when that was not our understanding of the situation. Similarly, people will try to characterise other parts of Indonesia as representing religious conflict, but we are not ourselves confident that that is the underlying principle since we know that the two major faiths involved have actually lived harmoniously in other times.

Mr Thompson—I think the situation in Ambon is a particular circumstance where that is true, where there is a recognition that a Christian-Muslim conflict has been almost encouraged. But the roots of that are elsewhere, we believe, although it becomes so complex it is really hard to discern. As the submission suggests, World Vision saw this as one opportunity where our experience elsewhere might be able to be used. At the time we prepared the submission, there was some suggestion that we might have been able to address the situation there, but that has not been possible.

Going back to my earlier comment about globalisation, as Beris said, when particular pressures emerge in particular places, people do try to look for scapegoats, to name names. Sometimes those names are in the name of religious difference, whereas the underlying

factor is exacerbated by events such as the Asian economic crisis—as in Indonesia and other parts—and perhaps this is a wrong attribution. But, nonetheless, in those circumstances, religious communities have come together to try and resolve differences and to address particular needs.

Mr Curtis—I do not think it has got any worse at all. I am not even sure it is a publicity issue as much as anything else. The Irish situation has been around for a long time; it certainly precedes the last 10 years. The Serb-Croat and Serb-Kosovar situation, again, whilst religion plays a nice rallying point and flag waving exercise, has been basically ethnic underneath it all.

The Hutu-Tutsi situation in Rwanda was between essentially Christian groups on an ethnic basis, rather than a Christian base and, in Indonesia, even back in 1965, I think you have to see the Jakarta situation as being more Javanese versus Chinese. That was the same in 1965, even though at that point the Chinese had not become part of the Protestant Church in the same way that they are 35 years later. So I think you would have to look for the ethnic considerations rather than the religious. It is very easy just to tag it with a religious overtone. It saves dealing with something that is a lot harder to deal with deep within our psyche, once we get to race and ethnic superiority.

Ms Gwynne—If I could just conclude by suggesting that one of the things that we have realised in recent years is that, as we approach our work in countries where there are strongly held religious affiliations, there is need for a much more sophisticated understanding on our part of other religions and a respectful dialogue with the leaders of those communities so that we work with them in the community, including some notable cases where we have helped facilitate the community development work of other faiths—non-Christian faiths—because we see this as fundamental to the strengthening of community organisation.

I think it is true, as has been pointed out in our submission, that non-government organisations and religious leaders share responsibility to ensure that there is a proper understanding of religious belief and faith systems and not to allow misrepresentation such as we sometimes face as a Christian organisation where there is a presumption that our behaviour is inappropriate or ill-informed and so on. We have a responsibility to make sure that people understand that, while we are Christian, we will operate in a way that is respectful of other faiths.

CHAIR—What are your views on the UN Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance in terms of effectiveness, resourcing and activities? We are not going to go into closed session on this one.

Mr Curtis—I was going to say, why just leave it to the individual rapporteur?

Mr Thompson—I think one of the challenges facing the commission on human rights at the moment is having adequate resources for all of its work. The role of the Special Rapporteur on Religious Intolerance—or, as now recommended, the Special Rapporteur on the Right to Freedom and Belief—I believe, needs for resources—as do all the special rapporteurs if their work is going to be more effective. They rely largely on NGO information. They do not have the resources to travel always and, to that extent, when

appropriate information is such an important part in informing their particular roles, it is limited in those roles.

The question of the special rapporteur with respect to religious freedom and belief needs to be seen in that broader context of the reform of the commission on human rights in itself and adequate resourcing of the instruments and offices of that commission.

CHAIR—Would it be fair to characterise your response by saying, 'Well meaning, but of limited effect'?

Mr Thompson—At this point, I think, yes.

CHAIR—You mentioned the US advisory committee on religious freedom abroad. You said that the head of that was a former World Vision gentleman. Having got on the record that you have, not a conflict of interest but, a particular interest there, how representative is the membership of that group? How effective has it been able to be? Has there been any action taken as a result of its recommendations?

Mr Thompson—In terms of membership of the commission, it represents all the major faith communities in the US. It was deliberately designed to include that representation as a means of gathering information. It is in the early years. The ambassador was only appointed earlier this year in May or June. It is only the second report of the committee. It is early days. I think we need to watch how it develops and to see to what extent it can be useful internationally. There are very few other places where such resources are available at this point.

One of the recommendations we did make was for Australia's own foreign affairs department to seek some kind of direct advice by representatives of religious communities, setting up a parallel, for example, to the regular NGO human rights dialogue that takes place with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. A similar opportunity for representatives of religious communities might meet regularly on an annual basis or something to provide that kind of information. It is an information role at this stage. It will be useful to monitor what happens. The annual reports provide a further opportunity to have a perspective and information on the pursuit of religious freedom and belief.

Mr Curtis—To add to that, the religious right in the US is no doubt exercising much greater influence over the US view of the world at the moment. That was quite clear in Washington last week, and it has been clear for a long time. It was a surprise to some people that the ambassador's report—which went to congress about three or four weeks ago up to June 30 and therefore did not include this example that I spoke of—was just as tough on those who have been perceived to be US friends as well as on enemies. That was perceived to be something of a surprise. There seemed to be a degree of neutrality at this time in the way in which the list was put together in terms of the top 10 who are offending religious freedom.

CHAIR—Which friends are you talking about?

Mr Curtis—Saudi Arabia and some of those got a pretty guernsey earlier on in the list, whereas they had tended in the past to be a little lower down on the list. I think we are going to continue to see that. So I back up Greg's comments that I think it would be good for the Australian government to work more closely with the US ambassador on that issue.

CHAIR—Of that top 10, were there any in our neck of the woods—I am talking about the region?

Mr Curtis—Myanmar and China did not do well—I think China was either No. 1 or No. 2. Neither did Iran or Iraq do well—the usual group that figure in those listings. But in our region certainly China and Myanmar were in the top five or six. I think India also got a guernsey.

Mr Thompson—Certainly the ambassador has particularly focused on India at this point, given the recent events in that place.

Senator HARRADINE—It is just a question of priority and what priority has been given. The State Department, in its human rights reports, does often have quite extensive information about violations of human rights. Do you know whether our Department of Foreign Affairs puts in the same amount of effort as, for example, the State Department? Do they have specific officers in each of the embassies or high commissions?

Ms Gwynne—My understanding of the Department of Foreign Affairs resourcing is that they do not have the capacity to have people tasked specifically on this subject other than through their normal diplomatic representation. Someone in each of the countries which are of particular interest I am sure would have one of the political staff tasked with observing, monitoring and reporting. But certainly from my somewhat dated experience, we have not had the resources in our Department of Foreign Affairs to provide the similar detailed level of reporting. In fact, we draw very heavily on the US, Amnesty, and other sorts of materials.

Mr Thompson—I think that is true. The officer in the department responsible has this particular mandate as one of the broader mandates on human rights generally. So at this point, he and the officers are reliant on picking up information—as far as information from NGOs are concerned—through the specific dialogue generally with NGOs, rather than necessarily with specifically faith based NGOs or faith communities.

Ms Gwynne—In the prioritisation process, one of the concerns that I have would be that, because we have in Australia a predominantly secular mind-set, religious freedom would be seen as a lesser priority when, in fact, from our experience, the religious and faith element is at the centre of many of the issues of poverty and justice, intolerance, abuse of human rights, and so on.

Mr Curtis—The embassy responsible for Azerbaijan is Moscow. I do not think they have made too many appearances in Baku. That raises the question—given the desire of Azerbaijan to move into the council of Europe and NATO and move westward generally—whether Ankara, Turkey, might be a more appropriate place rather than the old CIS. The US Embassy in Baku, for example, has a ranking officer who is there as the officer for human

rights. His sole responsibility is the propagation of human rights in its fullest extent, and I do not think that normally our embassies have that sort of position.

CHAIR—It is a matter of resources.

Mr Curtis—It is a matter of resources.

Senator HARRADINE—And priorities, I guess. Do nods mean yes?

Ms Gwynne—Yes.

Mr Thompson—Yes.

Senator HARRADINE—I notice in your submission at recommendation 14 on page 5, you refer to support by AusAID for NGOs and faith communities. You mentioned Canada. Would you like to tell us more about the development of religious freedom through aid and perhaps discuss the work of the Canadians in Sri Lanka?

Ms Gwynne—I would like to speak first to the general question of religion and development. CIDA, the Canadian International Development Agency, has for some years now been closely involved in dialogue between non-government organisations representing faith based agencies, including Christian and Islamic organisations. As a result of that, they did some very useful work in analysing religion and development issues to recognise the important role of religion in many of the countries in which we work. They also developed guidelines so that activities carried out by faith based organisations would not transgress into areas which are more appropriately the activities of religious organisations.

The AusAID discussions which took place last year brought us a short way towards that kind of understanding, although the AusAID dialogue was primarily about ensuring that government funds were not used for evangelism per se, again for religious purposes. We have still some work to do here in Australia among non-government organisations and with AusAID to develop our own understanding along the lines of the CIDA and the World Bank discussions on the role of religion in development. In relation to the Sri Lanka situation, Greg will speak on that.

Mr Thompson—We drew that out as a specific example of a mechanism through which the Canadian agency has seen the opportunity of addressing the situation in Sri Lanka where conflict is so rife while recognising the need for an initiative which would emphasise peace building as a particular dimension of the assistance in that program. To the extent to which various religious communities in that particular context are on both sides of the conflict as well as on both sides of the peace building process, the Canadians have determined that at this point it is a higher priority to support peace building through initiatives of NGOs than to continue to support officially the program through the government.

The priority in the Canadian aid program is on peace building and recognising the role of NGOs. I was going to use the term ‘non-state actors’, but that raises another question. Certainly, one of the non-state actors involved in that conflict needs to be brought into that process of peace building. The specific role of organisations like the National Peace Council

in Sri Lanka and particular Buddhist communities and others who have joined with Catholics and others in the particular context of peace building have been supported through the Canadian aid program.

CHAIR—In terms of the sort of work that we might look at for religious faith and belief overseas and what we can do to help where it is a problem—this committee has heard examples of China, Vietnam and a whole range of other places—can you amplify your view on what NGOs can do? In particular, I am interested to know what NGOs can do in concert. It seems to me, in talking to some of the smaller organisations that we have heard from, that a lot of them work in isolation, probably are not particularly well resourced and therefore often do not understand what facilities and resources may be available to them from government or wherever. Although there are obviously linkages between NGOs and governments on a fairly regular basis, particularly the bigger NGOs, what about in fact the NGO community getting together much more and pursuing some of these common goals?

Ms Gwynne—In the context of the discussions which took place with AusAID last year, the Christian non-government organisations did work together to ensure that the smaller agencies, particularly, who had not had the resources to develop ideas and principles surrounding the issues of religion in development were given a chance to catch up with the work that was being done elsewhere. This led to the proposal that we should have some kind of workshop or seminar where those agencies which have had the opportunity to develop these sorts of materials would share that work with other non-government agencies.

CHAIR—Why don't you just take them over?

Ms Gwynne—Because they perform excellent work in their own right in many parts of the world. The corollary to that, though, would be that, as we have done in parts of Africa, World Vision works in strategic alliances with a number of the smaller agencies because they do have a specialist contribution and a supporter base which is peculiarly theirs and perhaps would not attach so readily to a larger organisation.

As a legacy of our experience here in Australia in response to the discussions with AusAID, in Africa particularly and also in Asia, we are in the process of developing some work which would constitute a resource material so that all agencies which have an interest in these subjects would have a chance to ensure that their staff are adequately aware of the issues and are able to put in place the necessary guidelines for programming.

CHAIR—Given the current national obsession with user pays, will they pay for this information?

Ms Gwynne—Our understanding is that agencies would be prepared to pay if there were materials available and if we were able to facilitate their participation in these sorts of workshops.

Mr Curtis—I think some may share the chairman's frustration with some of the smaller NGOs.

CHAIR—I did not express frustration.

Mr Curtis—That is true; you did not. In civil society, these NGOs do come through a particular focus. They come out of someone's dream, which then gathers legs. Whilst from time to time it would be easier if we were able to weld those together in a more helpful manner—questions of economic rationalism aside—it does seem to be a difficult thing to do sometimes. From a field perspective, it is also an issue. You get some NGOs with a very narrow focus in the field. They are sometimes not willing to work together closely and in a way that would either harmonise or not cause disruption to other NGOs. It is a constant struggle, and yet I would say in a positive way that it generally works a lot better than is perhaps apparent.

CHAIR—My understanding is that if you looked, for example, at the membership of ACFOA, you have half a dozen big players who probably constitute 90 per cent of the market—my proportions may be slightly out, but it is of that nature—and you have 50 or 60 small players who are roughly the other 10 per cent of the market. It seems to me that you could therefore get much more value from the exercise if the NGO sector were streamlined a bit. I suppose I should not ask that of one of the big players—if not the biggest player—because that would probably be politically untenable in your business. What can the government do to help in this area of dealing with matters of religious intolerance overseas?

Mr Curtis—Perhaps I could lead off with my closing comments on the private area. Whilst we may not want to go as far as the US has in terms of particular offices for human rights in various locations, at least either recalcitrant or—I would have to say—in some ways ignorant governments could be continually persuaded to keep moving on and to gain an understanding of the fact that the full panoply of human rights is what is required for them to move into a full market economy and to become part of the global civil society.

That would be helpful, rather than coming at it from either extreme—saying, on the one hand, that this is not important because we are a secular country and that therefore religion does not matter to us or, on the other hand, insisting heavy-handedly that the full range of human rights and religious freedom be part of the scene or else we are out. I do not see how, in the situation that I described, anything other than a middle-of-the-road approach would be the most beneficial in terms of an educational role that helps governments to understand the impact of these things, one way or the other. I will leave the Australian perspective to my colleagues.

Mr Thompson—I will perhaps use this as a closing remark. One of the recommendations I would like to draw attention to is related to ways of fulfilling what I drew attention to earlier—Australia's role in mirroring to the rest of the world our project in developing a multicultural society that includes a respect for differences of expressions of religion and belief and the right to practise religion and belief. The Living in Harmony program of the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs is one such effort in community education, through which people can come together. I also reiterate that there is a strengthening of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade initiatives in the area of seeking information from representatives of faith based communities through regular dialogue.

Senator HARRADINE—Is that regular dialogue within Australia?

Mr Thompson—Yes. That is to gather information so we are better informed when advising our representatives internationally.

Senator HARRADINE—Would you see that as a regular formal meeting?

Mr Thompson—Yes—such as the regular formal meetings twice a year between the human rights NGOs and the department of foreign affairs. I would underline again and draw attention to the significance that World Vision sees in our publication, which I have provided for members of the committee, which includes, amongst 10 issues of urgent concern to address for children of the next millennium, the right to freedom to believe. That is item No. 10 on page 39 of that particular publication. It was released only last week at the UN by our international president. We use this as an instrument through which to inform and encourage both our supporters and also governments and the UN itself by drawing attention to the needs of children into the 21st century and the issues that need to be addressed if their rights are to be fully realised. The freedom to believe is, we believe, one of those 10 urgent issues.

Ms Gwynne—To follow on from that, we would want to acknowledge that where World Vision has raised concerns about abuse of human rights, particularly in relation to freedom of religion and belief, the department of foreign affairs has been responsive and they have found ways to make inquiries on our behalf and, where appropriate, to make representations to governments. I agree that we would like to see that capacity perhaps enhanced or better resourced through the kind of dialogue which Greg has mentioned. But I would like to also suggest that there is a role for us both domestically informing the values which are the foundation for our own multicultural, multiethnic and multireligious society and being proactive in programs of education, and for the government to find ways to support the efforts of the religious communities themselves and NGOs like World Vision, so that, just as we form the values and showcase the sort of society we would like to see more broadly applied here in Australia, we are then able to speak out on issues of religious intolerance internationally.

CHAIR—Having said you want the government to put in more resources and see education as being important, if we are going to write a report and say to the government, 'We want to improve things,' what sort of specific recommendations should we be making to government?

Ms Gwynne—That religious intolerance would be a key element as an indicator of the broader range of human rights. I believe it is one of those which, in the hierarchy of human rights, we have tended to relegate to a special category.

CHAIR—Given that resources are obviously finite, whether they are government resources or NGO resources, and that there are already some mechanisms there and you simply do not want to turn that over and start from scratch, what can we do that will improve the work of both government and NGOs, separately or together, to improve our effectiveness in this field?

Ms Gwynne—Intentional dialogue would be our strongest recommendation, that at least once a year, possibly twice a year, there is a forum where issues in relation to religious

intolerance could be tabled so that these are given adequate attention within the human rights framework.

Mr Thompson—And, as AusAID develops operational guidelines for implementing the six principles on human rights that the minister drew attention to and underlined in his parliamentary report last year, that the right to freedom of religion and belief would be recognised as one of those elements because of the contribution it can make to development and to relief of poverty as well as promoting peace.

CHAIR—You referred to the World Faiths Development Dialogue, which was established by the World Bank, and the UNDP's support for the World Conference on Religion and Peace. I may not have picked that up thoroughly so could you amplify on those a bit?

Mr Thompson—With respect to the World Bank, it has funded a working group representative of different faith communities. Jim Wolfensohn has met with the Archbishop of Canterbury and, as a consequence, recognised the importance of faith and expressions of faith in underlying causes of poverty but also in relief of poverty and full human development. The bank provided funding for a group of people to come together to give advice to the World Bank. Mr Wolfensohn talks about the representatives of religions in his latest annual report, as one of a coalition of partners.

In the case of the World Conference on Religion and Peace, a religion and development commission, which is fully funded by UNDP, has been established as a further mechanism for strengthening the partnership between representatives of religious communities and the UNDP in the realisation of its struggle against poverty and for human development. So these are institutionalised ways through which those two institutions have recognised and reflected the importance of religion and enabled those representatives of religions to come together to provide that kind of advice in operational practice as well as in policy development.

Senator HARRADINE—Do they have a web site? I would like to get more information about that.

Mr Thompson—I am not aware of the site for UNDP and the World Conference on Religion and Peace. As far as the World Conference on Religion and Peace is concerned, Brian Howe, the former deputy prime minister, is doing some work with the WCRP in leading to their conference in Amman, Jordan, in November preparing the work of the commission to ensure a contribution by WCRP to the Copenhagen Plus 5 Conference in June next year. Quite extensive work is being done at the moment with respect to that. The World Faiths Development Dialogue's reports are included in the World Bank's web site. They are fully available there.

Senator HARRADINE—Who is involved in the discussions?

Mr Thompson—I have a copy here, which I could leave with you, of the contribution they have made which details those who are participating in that particular World Faiths Development Dialogue, based out of Oxford in the UK.

Mr Curtis—In further response to your question, Mr Chairman, I would like to see our diplomats ask more of those specific questions rather than, whenever they proceed to discussions with host governments, just a broad discussion of human rights. One thing they could do is get a little bit more specific in some of those discussions as to how NGOs are being impacted, how civil society is developing and, where there is known persecution of religious freedom, say that this is not something that we find acceptable, even as a secular society such as Australia prides itself to be. I think we do tend to let our own easygoing nature reflect itself sometimes in our view of the world. Perhaps it is time to specify things just a little more, given that it is such a basic groundwork for the—

CHAIR—How do you know they do not do that?

Mr Curtis—I was reflecting on this and I cannot recall, in 21 years of dealing with our staff in 47 countries—and I am not being judgmental in saying this—that there has been a particular question that they have asked of me in any of those circumstances about what is happening with the church, what is happening with faith communities. It does not seem to be anywhere near the top of the list. Trade seems to be assuming a much more important role.

Senator HARRADINE—Could I raise the question of so many people now behind bars. We have had evidence of people spending some time in leg-irons and so forth in Vietnam. I am trying to think of the Christian term for recommendations of the law. The founder of Christianity has given—what is a different word for recommendation?—advice to release from captivity—

Mr Curtis—Release the captives. It is the Isaiah passage. The Nazareth manifesto.

Senator HARRADINE—Yes—quoted by Christ.

Mr Curtis—Luke 4.

Senator HARRADINE—So we have got to the stage where there are so many people of different religions in jail coming up to the year 2000. Is there a concerted move by the world community to spring open those doors at all? Is anything being done in a coordinated manner?

Mr Curtis—Not that I am aware of. There have obviously been coordinated attempts in the past couple of years on questions of debt and those things, but in terms of the freedom of the captives, it is still very much a country by country process, and perhaps it cannot be any other way, given the exigencies of the particular circumstances. Vietnam is different to, say, Azerbaijan. Even though both are former communist regimes, they are at different stages of development, of understanding what is necessary. There are different cultural and ideological philosophies underpinning those things. Other than perhaps the approach that Amnesty takes of their country by country report, or the US State Department report on freedom of religion, there probably does need to be a country by country approach.

Senator HARRADINE—Amnesty's approach of prisoner of conscience has an attraction, certainly to those people who are in the prisons. It is a question of what priority the Australian government gives to that too.

Mr Curtis—That would work best with individual prisoners. But in terms of just a general lifting of a prohibition or a constriction on religious belief, I am not sure that the Amnesty approach would work so well when some people are still desirous of being in full control of every aspect of a nation's life. They would tend to rebut that out of hand. But where it is an individual prisoner who is embarrassing to the country and can be highly focused, then I think that is still a very valid approach.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for coming and talking to us today. If there are any other matters on which we need further information, the secretary will write to you. We will send you a copy of the transcript of your evidence, to which you can make corrections of fact. Certainly, thank you very much indeed for coming.

[3.00 p.m.]

SUMMERS, Reverend Helen Louise (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Welcome. The subcommittee prefers that all evidence be given in public, but should you at any stage wish to give evidence in private, you may ask to do so and the subcommittee will give consideration to your request. Although the subcommittee does not require you to give evidence on oath, I should advise you that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and therefore have the same standing as proceedings of the House itself. I now invite you to make an opening statement if you wish, before we proceed to questions.

Rev. Summers—Thank you. The submission that I wrote was addressing the third term of reference in particular. It says:

the most effective means by which the Australian government and non government organisations can promote freedom of religion in the region and around the world.

In my submission I outlined that I felt that we needed to strengthen first of all our own interfaith dialogue within Australia before we could move out into the rest of the world.

I would really like to expand on the point that I made about interfaith dialogue within Australia. I must say that I am an Australian but I was out of the country for six years before coming back in this country about 20 months ago. In that time I found that there was not as much interfaith dialogue as I had anticipated. I had been living in New York where there were many interfaith organisations.

While there is interfaith dialogue amongst, say, Christians and Jews, Victoria's Islamic Council and the Victorian Council of Churches, which meets twice a year or four times a year over the past two years, and at the World Conference on Religion and Peace, there does not appear to be a large interfaith organisation that includes many of the smaller religious groups and spiritual traditions. In fact, some of these organisations actually exclude people.

I feel that we really do need to strengthen our position in Australia by opening up the interfaith dialogue to represent all people in a non-hierarchical organisation. Often when an organisation is hierarchical—and it is often important to have leaders of religions talking together—that dialogue can become very bogged down with doctrine. The average person in the street does not really have any access to that dialogue. What I would like to propose is that the government helps support the setting up of an interfaith centre, either one in each capital city or one that would be national, to draw together all of the different groups that are having dialogue together.

There are many interesting groups now that are working via the worldwide web such as the United Religions Initiative that was started by the Dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. Another is the Temple of Understanding, which has been running for over 40 years, which is also an NGO of the United Nations. There are many different organisations, such as UNESCO's Culture of Peace Program, that we could tap into. But I think we need a

body that is going to draw together all of these different interfaith groups that are working together for peace and understanding.

I am not quite sure how much to talk about what is in my submission because you have already read it, obviously.

CHAIR—Please keep in mind that we read lots of submissions. Senator Harradine is much more able, but I, for one, do not have the best memory in the world. So, if you want to refresh my memory on some of the detail, feel free to do so.

Rev. Summers—I feel that there is a lot of room to further our own understanding and tolerance of various religions in Australia. For example, Islam is Australia's second largest religious group, and yet there is not a lot of understanding from people from other traditions about Islam; in fact, there is a lot of misunderstanding. We see that reflected in the press and on television. I feel there is a lot of misunderstanding about Aboriginal spirituality, and that is certainly a barrier to reconciliation.

I am proposing that a seeding grant be given to establish an interfaith centre that would really open up the dialogue and activities to include all Australians, to include lay people, to come and participate in many different ways through the arts, through more formal dialogue, through training in conflict resolution and mediation for religious leaders and through developing curriculum materials that are based on human values for teachers in schools. The Victorian government has implemented a very important course in primary schools on the teaching of human values—the healthy relationships course. That is certainly moving in the right direction, but we need more of that.

There are some organisations that are developing very important material in this area on human values and interfaith areas. For example, Fraynework Productions, which is a production company organised by the Sisters of Mercy, is doing brilliant work in developing CD-ROMs and documentaries in this area. There are many facilities around that are doing very interesting work, but they need to be drawn together into a kind of central clearing house and an organisation that could organise events for the general public about the different spiritual and religious traditions that we have here.

CHAIR—Who do you see controlling this? You are not suggesting the government?

Rev. Summers—No, not the government. I see that there would need to be a board of interested people, not necessarily all clergy but certainly reflecting some clergy who have shown a great interest in interfaith activities and perhaps comprising other people who are interested in interfaith activities, such as professional people—lawyers, teachers, people of that nature.

CHAIR—But you are suggesting it be government funded?

Rev. Summers—I think a seeding grant is probably needed to get it going. My experience has come from America, and in America philanthropy is a way of life. It is much easier to find money to set up centres such as this from big companies and private foundations. The government could take that step to provide some sort of seeding grant until

that organisation could fund itself through contributions from corporations and foundations. I do not see it as necessarily coming from membership because then you have to decide who can be a member and who cannot be a member. It could come from donations from people and from corporations, et cetera.

CHAIR—Given that your emphasis so far has been on getting our house in order here—my phrase not yours—are you suggesting therefore that Australia should not be active in looking at religious intolerance overseas until we have done that, or are you saying that the two could be done side by side?

Rev. Summers—Yes. I think if we just take that first step in, as you say, putting our own house in order and gaining that strength of experience and of linking up with all the existing networks that are there, there are many networks that we could benefit from. There are many people around the world in countries where people are discriminated against on the basis of religion who would be willing to join with this network around the world, and many of them have already joined. So, by not necessarily going to the top of the clergy in many of the different countries, we can attract clergy and lay people who are interested in implementing the values that are there in each of the major world religions and spiritual traditions.

CHAIR—Whilst not in any sense disputing that there would be value in doing what you suggest in this country, given that resources are always finite, would money be better apportioned to that activity by the government as seed funding or would it be better to put more resources, for example, into working to try to help churches, say, in Vietnam where the government, on evidence that we have had so far, would appear to be quite specifically persecuting the church? Therefore, perhaps we should put some more diplomats in Hanoi to concentrate particularly on the church and religion there, to make representations to the government and to get around the country to have a look at what goes on.

Whilst, obviously, what you are suggesting in this country would be advantageous, generally in this country we have, I would have thought, a fairly reasonable standard of freedom of religion, and people are not persecuted for their religion and so on, whereas in other parts of the world they are. If we are looking at finite resources, would that not be perhaps a higher priority? I am not expressing a view; I am trying to draw out your thoughts on the matter. They are the hard questions government has to think about.

Rev. Summers—They are hard questions. And my experience does not come from the effectiveness of the diplomatic area but from the educational point of view. It may very well be that the money might be better spent there, but I think, as far as preventative means go, we can do a lot to strengthen our own position here. I think there is still discrimination in Australia, certainly amongst the Aboriginal community, on the basis of religion—of their spirituality. I think that, from the reports I have read of the inquiry into article 18 that came out last year, there certainly is discrimination in Australia on the basis of religion and belief. However, there may be more discrimination overseas in certain countries.

But I think, as a preventative means, we have a lot of ways of educating people in other countries through teaching materials. We export education. There is a large scope for developing English as a second language and foreign language teaching materials about

human values and comparative religion at all levels—elementary, intermediate and advanced. So I think we have a lot of existing ways in which we could use that expertise to promote respect and tolerance for other religions and beliefs.

CHAIR—Is there not a danger, though, that if we go overseas telling other people how to do it—educate them and so on—we run the risk of imposing our value system on their value system?

Rev. Summers—I do not think it needs to be done in that way. If we look at, for example, teaching English as a foreign or second language, there are seven areas of life, among them your work, your study, your family, your social life and your spirituality. We do not have to preach about religion but we can incorporate those values that are in all spiritual traditions into the teaching materials. For example, in primary schools in Victoria they might have one value for the week on caring and it could be caring for yourself through the healthy relationships course—caring for your health, caring for your own wellbeing—or caring for others. All the teachers in the different subject areas will build caring into their teaching materials. In geography or history, it might be caring for others in other countries. How can we care for others in other countries? I think there are many different ways in which we can promote these values so that we raise the awareness of people both within our own country and overseas in human values so that we have more respect and tolerance for each other. It is probably a slow process but it is an effective one.

CHAIR—It is slow for sure.

Senator HARRADINE—Could you elaborate a little bit upon the activities of the interfaith groups in the United States with whom you are associated? What sort of structure, meetings, et cetera are involved?

Rev. Summers—For example, the Temple of Understanding, which is based in New York, is one of the oldest organisations. Members of the international council include the XIV Dalai Lama. I have a list here of people who are involved and over 60 others who represent many of the major world religions. The Temple of Understanding is an NGO in consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council. The trustees of the cathedral would represent many of the major world religions. They are an NGO of the United Nations. They hold many seminars and workshops about breaking down our misconceptions about other religions. They would hold many interesting events in the arts, like music, that are based around the different religions, opening people up to the beauty that is in each of the major world religions. Apart from that, they are working on developing the Temple of Understanding groups in different parts of the world where they can look at how we can develop the spiritual life of children in the various traditions. They give awards each year for people who have made a difference in breaking down ignorance amongst the different religious groups. I am not quite sure whether I am answering your question.

Senator HARRADINE—Yes, I understand.

Rev. Summers—They are very much involved in the opening of the United Nations and they usually organise the ceremony where religious leaders from the main religions of the world come together to pray for the successful operation of the next year of the United

Nations. They might hold events on looking at certain values that you find in each of the major world religions to show that there is this common thread that runs through them rather than looking at all the differences. We acknowledge and respect the differences but when we find the areas that we have in common, we have that unity where we can come together as one.

The Interfaith Centre of New York is a very large and a very busy organisation but it is more of a local organisation in the New York area. It is headed by Dean Morton, who is the former dean of the Cathedral of St John the Divine which is Episcopalian. The Temple of Understanding has an executive secretary who is a Catholic nun.

The United Religions Initiative was started a couple of years ago by the former dean of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. He was present at the forming of the United Nations and felt that we needed this United Religions Initiative to run alongside the United Nations. That is very active, although I must say there are very few people in Australia who know about it and who are involved in it. People in New Zealand are more involved than in Australia but we hope that will change.

There are many different organisations that are doing very good work. I think there is a way in which we could network with all of them. We would find that, with the resources that are available from the groups that are really making very interesting CD-ROMs and teaching materials, we could certainly help to educate ourselves in Australia and come together to really fully appreciate the religions and spiritual traditions that we have in Australia. At the same time, we could look to see how we could export some of these ideas in our teaching materials and help some of our neighbours to perhaps set up an interfaith centre. We would not be dictating to them how it should be run, but helping them to draw together all the people from their traditions who see that there is this common good that will bring people together to work together for peace.

UNESCO has developed the Culture for Peace Network and that is another one that we can tap into. I think there is a lot of potential here but somehow we need to have some financial support. When I have spoken to different leaders of religions here in Australia—and I certainly have not spoken to everybody but just to a few—or people in different seminaries, they have said, 'We are all so busy just doing what we are doing.' We need some support to pull together all of these ideas and to network to make a resource centre that we can draw upon.

I would like to add that I think we are ready perhaps to develop a little more respect in Australia for the many religious and spiritual traditions. We have this wonderful multicultural society which offers us many different ways of looking at the divine. I was watching television on 13 October when the Managing Director of the Australian Tourist Commission, Mr John Morse, was speaking at the National Press Club. He spoke very interestingly about Australia's role in the world and our tourism options. He was saying that one of our national characteristics was our irreverence. Our tourist promotions overseas have been based on our irreverence. While this can be a very healthy characteristic to have, the opposite is also true that, in a way, we can lose our sense of the sacred. When we look at the numbers of young people, especially young males, in Australia who have committed suicide, we have the highest percentage of young males in the world that commit suicide.

Where is their sense of the sacred? Where have we let them down? I think it is time that we really looked at this and recognise that religion or spirituality is a very important part of our life. When we do not fill that inner part of ourselves then we fill it with addictions, drugs and other senseless ways of activity.

CHAIR—Have you come back from America to get this structure off the ground?

Rev. Summers—I came back not for this but somehow or other I have been delayed in my return. I am very much interested in this area and would very much like to perhaps play a part in it. I see that the president, or whoever would head this interfaith centre, would be a religious leader who is well respected in Australia and who is already well known for his or her interfaith activity. I would certainly like to put energy into it. I am returning to New York, hopefully on Monday, to pack up my possessions but I am really coming back for personal family reasons.

CHAIR—Here is a piece of almost relevant information. The government last year, or earlier this year, provided seed funding to a national human rights education body—a one-off seed funding of $10,000. The person who is running it is based in Perth; it is actually not even going to go very far in terms of getting his flights paid for back and forth. I think funding is a challenge, I have to say.

In your recommendation 3, you talked about encouraging the media to show positive examples of coexistence. In our profession, we are probably somewhat jaundiced about the media. Do you think it is likely that there would in fact be popular support for showing the kinds of program you would obviously have made and the sorts of things that you would want to do with your proposal? Does it get much media coverage in the United States, for example? The media generally like to broadcast bad news. Good news is not news.

I draw as a parallel, before you respond, the six years I spent on the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. One of the things that we addressed was how to get the media to actually give us some coverage about some of the good things that the council and other people were doing in trying to mend the relationship between indigenous and non-indigenous people in this country. Getting the media to do that was very difficult.

In the end, we paid out of our budget to take senior journos to remote Aboriginal communities and show them what the communities living there were like. We explained some of the issues and so on, so that they were better educated and at least did not write the ignorant comments and columns that they had often written. At least we stopped some of the positively bad stuff. We actually ran special sessions for the owners and editors of the major metropolitan newspapers and took them off in a group to the Northern Territory. It was only by a very concerted campaign that we had some reasonable coverage, but it was very occasional and mostly we had to pay for the coverage we wanted in the form of adverts.

It is a challenging area and, whilst I do not disagree with your intent, I wonder how effective you might have found it was in terms of getting the good things broadcast in America and how you would go about it here.

Rev. Summers—As I say, I have not been there for 20 months. There are quite a number of religious and spiritual programs that are broadcast in America but of course in New York there are over 80 channels.

CHAIR—It is a different ball game.

Rev. Summers—Yes, it is a different ball game. But it is interesting that there is a show which is called *Touched by an Angel* which is now shown in Australia. I do not think it has had a high rating here. But that show had a higher rating in America than *20-20*, which is a *Sixty Minutes* kind of program. There is a hunger there for these kinds of programs and I think it is growing. If you can have presenters to introduce it who are very well known and who attract people to the program I think it could really help.

For the past few years I have been developing and doing the research for a documentary series on spiritual experience because each of the major world religions started from spiritual experience and was then put into doctrine, dogma, rituals and so on. When we go to the essence of each of the major world religions we go back to that original spirituality, that original experience of spirit and so this is what the series is about that I plan to do. But whether I obtain the funding to do it is a question that I am still working on. But there are many programs in the US that are about spirituality and religion and many of them have been very highly received.

Getting back to Australia, how can we attract the networks to put on these programs? Maybe we have just got to take the heads of the networks into certain situations where we help to make them more aware. What are we going to do about all the young people who are committing suicide? What do they suggest?

CHAIR—The hearing is for me to ask the questions!

Rev. Summers—That was a rhetorical question.

CHAIR—Yes. What we are looking for is to get specific ideas.

Rev. Summers—Yes.

CHAIR—I think we all acknowledge the problem, but the question is how we deal with it. One of the issues that often emerges during discussions about freedom of religion and belief is the growth of cults or sects. Have you had any experience in that area? If so, do you think it is possible to distinguish between, on the one hand, a cult—and, loosely defined, the popular view of a cult is an organisation that is harmful to its members and society—and, on the other hand, perhaps a minority or new religion which is not harmful to society?

Rev. Summers—Yes. I was about to say that Christianity started as a cult. If we use that definition that it might be harmful to its members—I am sorry; I have forgotten your original question.

CHAIR—I asked whether you have had any experience in this area, whether you think it is possible to distinguish between the two or how we deal with those situations. If a new

organisation comes along claiming to be a religion, how do we distinguish whether it is actually harmful to its members or whether it is a genuine new religion or movement that we should accept? You have been in America, and America I think has had some fairly bad experiences with cults.

Rev. Summers—Yes, although I think a new understanding of the Waco cult is now coming out. I guess, from the perspective of the individual, people are free to choose whichever leader they want to follow, but if individuals are harmed or do not have any freedom and they complain about it, I guess there are laws. The legal position is one that I am not very familiar with.

CHAIR—In this country presumably we would take no action unless somebody committed a criminal act in some shape or form, and they would be prosecuted as an individual. But China has taken the view that—for example with the Falun Gong, which also operates in this country—the organisation is bad and therefore they have moved against that organisation.

Rev. Summers—I do not know enough about that organisation, except my impression is that it is not a negative organisation. As far as I am aware, it involves people practising a kind of Qi Gong, which is about the energy of the human energy field. I do not know the reasons why the government finds it threatening. I do not know enough about it to be able to comment.

CHAIR—No, that is all right.

Rev. Summers—As far as an organisation being recognised as a religion in Australia is concerned, there are certain criteria for it to be registered as a religion, aren't there?

CHAIR—Yes, I think there probably are; certainly for tax purposes there would be.

Senator HARRADINE—The activities of the interfaith groups include discussions at a senior level between the leaders of the various faiths. What about prayer? Are there grassroots movements in the United States for ecumenical prayer meetings? That is growing in Australia—very much so, as a matter of fact. I believe it is a great sign.

Rev. Summers—Yes.

Senator HARRADINE—From the Christian point of view—if they get their act together—obviously there are prayer groups amongst Christians calling to be inspired, breaking down the walls of division so as to achieve the call of the Saviour to be one. Is that alive in the United States?

Rev. Summers—I believe it is. I am not familiar with it as an ongoing regular group that meets. But, for instance, in New York at the height of the Bosnia-Herzegovina war, I organised an evening of prayer for peace in the Cathedral of St John the Divine for women from all religious traditions. Each woman prayed a prayer from her own tradition, and we also had music from that tradition—girls' choirs from the different traditions sang. It was very much a women's evening, but each of the major world traditions was represented:

Jewish, Islamic, Sikh, Baha'i, Christian and Buddhist. It was very beautiful. There are many of those events where we draw people together and share the things that we have in common. We respect the things where we differ. We are not trying to convert each other but to share the things that we do hold in common. There could be many events that we could hold, certainly in Melbourne and throughout the rest of Australia, that would draw people together from different traditions to share and to honour each religion as a separate path to the divine.

CHAIR—We have asked you a number of questions. Are there any other loose ends that you want to tidy up? Do you feel you have told us all you need to tell us?

Rev. Summers—I probably did not go at it in the way I had planned. I would like to know about the relationship between the government and the various religions in Australia. Is there a way in which the government can give a seeding grant for something like this or for anything else that is to do with religion or is there a complete separation between the state and religious activity?

CHAIR—To be honest, I am not sure. I will ask the secretary to take the question on notice and we will write to you. I do not want to give you the wrong information. I do not think the government actually funds religious activities, but it does give tax deductions to religious organisations. I would want to verify that. We will find out and let you know.

Rev. Summers—Would it be possible to get something like this off the ground until the religious activity was able to become self-sufficient.

CHAIR—We will find out.

Rev. Summers—Thank you.

CHAIR—Thank you very much for coming here today. If there are other matters that we need additional information on, the secretary will write to you. We will send you a copy of the transcript of your evidence to which you can make corrections of fact.

Rev. Summers—I would like to add, because a lot of people are unaware, that in my submission I said I was an interfaith minister. I come from an Anglican background and I studied for two years in New York at the new seminary, where you stay in your own tradition but you learn about and appreciate the other traditions. I just wanted to make that clear. Thank you.

Senator HARRADINE—You have made a lot of other things clear in your submission but, as the chair says, we ask questions about things that we have not got clear in our minds from the submission. There are a number of other points that you made, too, which we did not ask questions about.

CHAIR—But which we understand.

Rev. Summers—Thank you very much.

[3.44 p.m.]

JUDEH, Mr Asem (Private capacity)

CHAIR—Welcome. The subcommittee prefers that all evidence be given in public, but should you at any stage wish to give evidence in private you may ask to do so and the subcommittee will consider your request. Although the subcommittee does not require you to give evidence under oath, I should advise you that these hearings are legal proceedings of the parliament and therefore have the same standing as proceedings of the House itself. I now invite you to make an opening statement, if you wish, before we proceed to questions.

Mr Judeh—As I mentioned in my submission, since its creation Israel has claimed that it is a Jewish state and that the creation of Israel and Zionism came about as a reaction to anti-Semitism in Europe and Russia 150 to 200 years ago. For 51 years this led to some 800,000 Palestinians being forced from their homes and lands into Zion. Palestinian refugees continue to demand implementation of their right of return and compensation recognised by the international community with the adoption of United Nations Resolution 194.

Since I came to Australia, I tried very hard to promote the Palestinian refugee cause, but as a Palestinian I found it very hard for different reasons. Mainly I found it hard because Australian Foreign Affairs fails to work for Palestinians and the injustices done to them because of its long history in supporting Israel. I can summarise what the government of Australia has to say about the Middle East. In a letter dated 28 May to me about the Australian government's policy on the Middle East, Mr Downer said that Australia is not a major player in the Middle East and that we will continue to maintain an appropriately low-key political involvement, encouraging the efforts of others such as the United States who have been instrumental in pushing the peace process forward.

When we approached them that is what they said to us, but, as I mentioned in my submission, when the Jewish community, particularly Zionists, lobby in Australia, it is a completely different story. For example, from these two envelopes received from the head of the Middle East section of Foreign Affairs, I can summarise Australian policy. I received these two envelopes within one week—the first one on 9 June and the second one on 16 June. This is the way they humiliate Palestinian, Arabic and Islamic communities when they approach them.

CHAIR—I am sorry, but I do not understand what you are getting at. I am not trying to be difficult; I just do not understand. What is wrong with the envelopes?

Mr Judeh—Is this the right envelope to be sent to an Australian taxpayer?

CHAIR—I can see a sticky label that has been crossed out. Is that a previous address or something?

Mr Judeh—Yes, this is a previous address.

CHAIR—Your previous address?

Mr Judeh—No.

CHAIR—Somebody else's?

Mr Judeh—This is supposed to be recycled.

CHAIR—So they are recycling envelopes?

Mr Judeh—Yes. If it happened once it could be by accident.

CHAIR—They might be doing it to everybody.

Mr Judeh—Maybe. I will give you another example. Within a short period, I rang the director of human rights in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. I left three messages for him but he did not get back to me until the third time. The first time I rang him—and sent him an email—was on 1 October. I rang him again on 4 October and left a message, then again on 8 October, and then he got back to me.

The documents in this envelope, as I mentioned in my second submission of 6 October, are absolutely not related to any foreign affairs policy. When I rang this person he said to me that they were from well-known books, but these books are from Zionist writers. If this is the case, why are we a member of the United Nations, wasting our taxpayers' money and so on?

Senator HARRADINE—Are you referring to page 7 of your supplementary—

Mr Judeh—Yes. I brought a few paragraphs, which are pages 4, 5 and 6.

Senator HARRADINE—You can be assured that we have got those and—

Mr Judeh—I sent the attachment after I submitted that.

Senator HARRADINE—Thank you. We are across that.

Mr Judeh—What I want to highlight is that if we do not have a fair foreign affairs policy it will not promote Australian multiculturalism.

I found other difficulties that related to these issues. I have been a member of the ACFOA Middle East working group as an observer member for nearly one year. Australian NGOs are scared to speak out because the Australian government does not speak out about what is happening in the Middle East, about the injustices there and Israel's violation of human rights. I sent a copy of my letter to the ACFOA Executive Director, Janet Hunt.

This policy is reflected in different ways from other issues like the dialogue between Jews and the Christians. It makes Christians scared to speak out and criticise Israel. I had the chance to visit the Jewish Holocaust Museum and I saw the picture of church leaders with Nazi leaders. This will give a message to Christians about their role in the past and remind them about their history with the Jews.

The person who took me to the Jewish museum, the public officer of the Australian Jewish Democratic Society, David Zyngier, said to me that the Muslims in Spain and North Africa never abused Jewish people. But Zionists today are promoting Islamists as terrorists to give a bad idea about Muslims.

In one of my letters to Mr John Howard, one of the letters in my second submission, I suggested to him that Australia should open a museum or an education centre in an Australian university if Australia supports peace in the Middle East and wants to maintain a fair policy. In Europe, Canada, and even in America, they have research centres for refugees. But Australia does not. Here we find all universities are talking only about the Jewish Holocaust, they never mention the Palestinian Holocaust. Current Australian foreign affairs policy will not educate the Australian public about injustice in the Middle East.

I was shocked when I found out, in the letter from Mrs Kathy Sullivan to me, that the Australian government approved all Jewish organisations for tax exemptions. I consider that illegal because this money goes directly to abuse the Palestinian Israeli minority inside Israel, and goes to build settlements, as I showed in the call from American Peace For Now asking the Jewish National Fund to stop funding illegal settlements on the West Bank.

In recent days the Arab members in the Knesset raised a bill to stop the Jewish National Fund. As we know, the Palestinians now are building their institutions and they are building their unity. Sooner or later they will ask the same question as the Israeli Arab Knesset members raised in recent days. I post it in the digest recently. The Australian government has legalised funding of violations of human rights through these organisations.

CHAIR—Do you mean through their tax deductible status?

Mr Judeh—Yes, because this is taxpayers' money. This goes with the Australian name. It is well known that this tax money is approved by all Australian parliamentary members. From time to time we find, through my visits to the Internet, that some parliamentary members and senators raise questions about this money. When the minister was asked a question, he answered it in a different way.

For example, Mr Laurie Brereton asked Mr Downer a question in the parliament about Mr Gutnick's activities. Mr Downer replied that Mr Gutnick has private Australian citizenship and he has the right to do what he likes. That means, as an Australian, I can donate money to the pro-Indonesian militia and nobody can do anything legally against me since I have citizenship and has the right to do that.

Mr Gutnick, according to the attachment in my submission, is listed as a donor, but he has a problem, according to the Ma'aretz article, in that he likes the media and he likes to show his activity. There are many, many members of the Jewish community who donate much more than him. And we know very well that this money goes to illegal activities.

Recently, in America and Canada, there is a new Jewish organisation, as I mentioned in my first submission, called the New Israel Fund. This organisation is to fund secular Jews and the Arab minority inside Israel, and it came as a response to Jewish National Fund activities.

CHAIR—Which you would see as being a positive thing?

Mr Judeh—Yes, but this New Israel Fund is not operated in Australia because the Zionist movement here is very strong. Even the Jewish community is scared to speak out. A Jewish friend gave me the answer to what I was looking for while we were dining together—our two families—recently. I asked him why, during the dinner with Laurie Brereton, the annual dinner for the Australian-Jewish Democratic Society, he had not said this but had said the opposite. His wife replied, 'Because we want to fit within the community. Jewish people want to speak out, but because they want to fit within the community they cannot speak out.' Prominent Jewish people had the courage last year, in the 50th anniversary of Israel, to publish an advertisement which said, 'We, as Australian Jews, take the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the occupation of Palestine to recognise the struggle of the Palestinian people for an independent state.'

Recently our leader, Yasser Arafat, visited Japan. Why, when Mr Tim Fischer visited the Middle East in 1997 and invited Yasser Arafat to come to Australia, did the Prime Minister, John Howard, cancel the visit? Why is the Palestinian delegation in Canberra not recognised by the Australian government?

CHAIR—The answer to that is that we do not have diplomatic relations with the Palestinians. That is why there is not official recognition.

Mr Judeh—Japan does not have. He can come as a visitor.

CHAIR—There is a difference between visiting and having official recognition. You are mixing there the visit of Yasser Arafat and the recognition of Ali Kazak in Canberra. All I am saying is that the reason Ali Kazak is not officially recognised in diplomatic terms is because Palestine is not at the moment an internationally accepted independent state and we do not have diplomatic relations—the same as with Taiwan.

Mr Judeh—I can put my question this way: can the Australian government invite Yasser Arafat to Australia?

CHAIR—Of course they can.

Mr Judeh—Why did John Howard cancel that?

CHAIR—I do not know. I was not aware that he had. Australia can invite who it wants to to come here.

Mr Judeh—Okay. In July this year there was a United Nations conference about illegal settlements. I have the General Assembly resolution. Two countries, America and Israel, refused to attend this conference; five countries were absent, Australia one of them. They agreed to have the summit in Geneva in July this year on illegal settlements. Australia boycotted the summit, as you know—Downer announced that. Isn't Australia a member of the United Nations? If 154 countries agree to the summit, why did Australia say no? Downer made it clear in the Australian Jewish newspaper—it is one of my attachments as well—that the Jewish community has lobbied the government for half a century. What does this mean—

for people to lobby the government for half a century? The prominent Zionist leaders visited Downer before Australia announced boycotting the summit.

What also struck me, and maybe the wider community, was that the foreign affairs department submission to this committee did not mention Israel at all. It is very clear from Australian representation in the United Nations and so on and the visit of Ian Sinclair and other members to the region that Israel has violated every article of the Geneva convention. Why is Israel excluded from this report? It is to give the Australian community—because this report goes to Australian NGOs, human rights groups and other institutions—an impression that Islamic countries are violating human rights and Israel is the only democratic country in the Middle East. The only thing they mention about Israel is the 13 Jews in Iran.

When it comes to Israel the Australian government does everything possible to help or support Israel, such as for the 13 Jews. I have brought articles from Jewish newspapers about MPs or government responses, and all the documents I supplied—about 400 or 500 documents—are on Jewish people or Zionists or Christians. In this regard, why did Australia, after the Gulf War, publish this report on human rights in Kuwait, called *A victory turned sour*, by Middle East Watch. There were about 3,000 Palestinians killed or tortured after the Gulf War and I could not find anything in the *Hansard* about those 3,000 Palestinians.

A few families came to Australia after the Gulf War. One of those families was the Salsa family. The mother lost her son in Kuwait. She does not know anything about what happened to him. As a mother, she will not live in peace unless she knows if he is dead or alive. She took every occasion she could to write to the government during the time of Keating and of John Howard. The Australian government's response? 'We are sorry. You are Australian. Your son is not Australian.' Is this how Australia promotes human rights when it comes to the Palestinians? It is clear that Australian policy, I can confirm, is absolutely biased. I am ready to debate this publicly and I have started talking about it publicly on the Internet. As we learnt with East Timor, the Australian community reacted angrily over East Timor because of Australia's history with East Timor. As the Nobel Peace Prize winner Jose Ramos Horta said, Australians betrayed their own people.

And now from the Australian community, there is the example of Alan Reid. I met him last year when Naela Rabah visited Australia through the Middle East Council of Churches of Australia. For five years now, he has taken groups from the church to educate them about injustice in Israel. I do not need to talk about it because all of you know about it. But the problem is that we need to speak publicly about it. I feel that the Australian NGOs are scared to talk because of Australian foreign affairs policy bias.

This is how they speak about it. In a submission from the ACFOA Middle East working group sent recently to Downer, they reported that they are witnessing the human rights violation of the Palestinian situation in the West Bank and Lebanon. They lobbied the government just for money. I visited most of them. I could not find one article about Palestinian refugees in their publications.

CHAIR—You are talking about ACFOA?

Mr Judeh—Yes, ACFOA. I had a long discussion with the Red Cross, for example, some time last year. It was at a seminar for volunteer work in international law. I saw pictures of all the refugees in the world. I asked the lady there why there were no pictures from Palestinian camps? She said, 'We do not talk politics; we are a neutral organisation.' I said, 'But this would be a picture like those pictures.' I challenge the Australian government to go to every Australian NGOs. They will not find one picture about Palestinian refugees because of Australian foreign affairs policy bias.

This will come forward in the future, when the people get educated. In ACFOA's submission to the foreign affairs minister, they said:

Australian NGOs have developed humanitarian programs with local NGO partner organisations in the refugee camps in Lebanon over many years, witnessing with growing alarm the discrimination, suffering, and the decline in support services to these camps from the international community.

In my letter to Janet Hunt on 23 August 1999, I said:

According to ACFOA Code of Conduct for NGOs:

1.1 This code of conduct defines the standards of governance, management, financial control and reporting with which non-government development organisations (NGDOs) should comply and identifies mechanisms to ensure accountability in NGDO use of public monies. The code aims to maintain and enhance the standards throughout NGDO community, thereby ensuring that public confidence in the integrity of individuals and organisations comprising the NGDO community and in the quality and effectiveness of NGDO programs is well founded.

This lady—her husband is Australian—worked there for 25 years. This is how I interpret the NGDO's role in educating the community. Marguerita Skinner wrote a book recently called, *Between Despair and Hope: Windows on my Middle East Journey 1967-1992*. Her husband, an Australian, also worked in the United Nations and he is a regular writer in the *Canberra Times*. She said in her book that her first encouragement to write emerged from the mothers at the refugee camp clinic in Jordan. During the harsh winter of 1968, they begged her to tell their story to my people. She did so and shares it with us in her graphic account. She gives us all the different and personal views of the Middle East and its people. If Australian NGOs are witnessing the Palestinian suffering, why don't they tell the Australian public about the Palestinian suffering? All the time in the media, and on TV from time to time, there is anti-Semitic information about the Holocaust. What about the Palestinian refugees who lived for 51 years in camps?

As I have said, there is an alarming situation in the community. There are two points about Austcare. It came to my attention from Greg Thompson from World Vision—he came to this hearing—that Austcare donated money or funded money to help the Jewish Falasha flee from Ethiopia to Israel. It is this sort of activity.

CHAIR—Sorry, say that again.

Mr Judeh—Austcare funded the rescue of the Jewish Falasha from Ethiopia to Israel. Is this kind of activity legal for an organisation supposed to be working only for refugees, where Palestinian people denied access to their homeland? They should know that. Austcare

had a youth conference. This is another way that they manipulate the Australian community and give them the wrong message about the Palestinians.

It came to my attention that they had a youth conference organised by Austcare and STTA. I asked them to allow PREA, the Palestinian Refugee and Exile Awareness group, to play a role in educating the Australian community because it is PREA's role to educate the community about the situation. They refused. I sent a letter to Ms Kate Ramsay. When I found that she refused, I alerted the community through the Internet. In my mailing list, I have some Australian people as well. One of them, Mr Skinner, the husband of Marguerita Skinner, wrote to Austcare and said that as a dedicated Australian to humanitarian causes, and with great admiration for the work of Austcare, I write to support Mr Asem Judeh's request to you to invite a Palestinian to participate in activities promoting awareness of refugees.

CHAIR—Did they give a reason?

Mr Judeh—There was no time. We had already planned. I talked to her—

CHAIR—Did they respond to your letter?

Mr Judeh—Yes, they responded.

CHAIR—Did they give a reason as to why they said no?

Mr Judeh—There was no time. Of course, they found excuses. Usually, the excuses I heard were that there was no budget, no resources and no time. This was even from the government as well. But, finally, she agreed. I wrote her a letter three months before the conference. When she agreed, I found that it was still under process because the idea had just been published in their magazine.

One of the Palestinian community leaders agreed to speak with a group of youth. Her name is Rima Awad. She asked the students, year 11 and 12, 'What do you know about the conflict in the Middle East?' All of them said, 'We know that Israel is the Promised Land for Jews.' The Australian community knows nothing about Palestinian refugees. I found this book in one of the school libraries here.

CHAIR—For the *Hansard*, what is it called?

Mr Judeh—*The Arab-Israel Conflict*—a history, by I. Bickerton and M.N. Pearson. This book says that even Muslims agree that Israel or Palestine is the Promised Land for Moses' People. During my visit to the Holocaust Museum, I noticed that they were encouraging schools to visit the museum to see the stereotypes. I am not against education. What I want to achieve as part of my agenda is to have an educational museum for Palestinian refugees and holocaust victims, to have real educational material, not to be shown stereotypes, not to make people frightened and scared to talk about the Holocaust or about the injustice in the Middle East.

These things are happening because the Australian government has no policy on the Middle East. Their policy is supportive of Israel. It is not supportive of justice. Another book is about the dialogue between the churches—

CHAIR—It is called *The Mountains of Israel: the Bible and the West Bank* by Norman Archibald.

Mr Judeh—I got this book from Senator Barney Cooney's office. I am a regular visitor to him. The organisation talks about Jerusalem, the capital of Israel. I assumed they sent it to many senators and MPs. As Mr Downer said, they have been lobbying the government for half a century, people to people. That is what we should do. We want to lobby the government not to be pro-Israel or pro-Palestinian. We want them to be pro peace and justice.

There are no names, only on the telephone numbers. I do not work in the dark. If I have the right, I work in the light. I do not work in the dark. I invited the Jewish community to this hearing but they did not come. I did two forums with them. I went to every function they held that I could attend. What I heard from those functions was shocking. I learnt the meaning of manipulation. I saw it with my eyes. If I have time, I will go through it.

I can summarise Australian policy on the Middle East in a few words from Gough Whitlam's book, *Abiding Interests*, where he said the tragedy is that, over the preceding five years, the heads of government of the United States, Australia and associated countries have not spoken clearly and helpfully. He said that Australia and the United Nations follow America's vote. If America votes yes, they vote yes; if America votes no, they vote no. That is why, when America boycotted the Geneva Convention in July, Australia also boycotted Geneva.

I am very glad, by the way, that Gareth Evans did not win the UNESCO position. I am very glad—and, at the same time, not proud—because UNESCO is to promote peace. If Australia thinks the Middle East is too far away to be a policy concern, why is there a UNESCO department solely for the Far East and solely for the Middle East and so on? Why does Australia want to be one of the major countries involved in the reform of the Security Council of the United Nations? Why do they want to reform the Security Council of the United Nations if our role in the United Nations is to vote with and to follow America?

Senator HARRADINE—Could I come in here. You have given us some useful information. Much of it I was aware of, and I understand what you are putting, but the focus of this inquiry is rather narrow and it deals with the violations of religious freedom. For the record, could you please tell us what, in your view, are the significant violations of religious freedom by the Israeli government in the territories covered by it?

Mr Judeh—As I said, Israel, because it is a Jewish state, does not give rights to other religions. One of my witnesses is a Christian and has visited the Middle East twice. She witnessed the situation from a religious point of view. Because of that, I can say that they do not give rights to Christians either.

Senator HARRADINE—On page 5 of your submission, you mentioned a number of points. You said:

> It is not easy for Christian or Moslem Palestinians to access their holy places such as Churches or Mosques.

The submission then goes through a number of violations there. What are the ongoing practical effects on Muslims and Christians with respect to their right to religious freedom and expression?

Mr Judeh—The Palestinians's homes are demolished, their land is confiscated, they cannot move because of the closure of the West Bank or Gaza, and they cannot go to the mosque. This is all related to the fact that they are not Jews. If they were Jews, they would be allowed to move, to build houses, to buy land, to travel and so on.

CHAIR—I think Mr Judeh is saying that the fundamental point is: because Palestinians are not Jews, they are discriminated against in every single walk of life.

Mr Judeh—True.

CHAIR—That is the point you are making, isn't it?

Mr Judeh—Yes. All these violations are based on this point. They have recently discovered that there are Jews in Cuba. Fidel Castro has recently allowed a few hundred Jews to go to Israel, to the Promised Land. Why are we not allowed to go there? Why are refugees not allowed to go there? These activities are funded. I want your questions to concern funding through Australian taxpayers' money. This is the question I want to ask your committee. What is the government's answer? Why do they allow this to happen and how are they going to stop it? Josef Gutnik made it clear that he did it because he is a religious person; he did it from a religious point of view. The Jewish National Fund involves activities which are only for the Jews.

CHAIR—I am going to stop you there. I think we understand what you are saying to us, and you have given us a lot of documentary evidence. I should make it clear for the benefit of everybody in the room that the purpose of these hearings is for you to amplify your written evidence and for us, if necessary, to ask questions. Therefore, any conclusions that we draw—we have not drawn any conclusions yet, one way or the other—will occur later, so this hearing is purely an information gathering exercise for us. It is important that people understand the nature of this afternoon's activities. Unfortunately, Senator Harradine has to go and get an aeroplane—that is a reality of life for us, I am afraid. I thank you for coming here today. If there are other matters on which we want to get further clarification, we will write to you. We will also send you a transcript of your evidence, to which you can make corrections of fact.

I am not going to get into a debate on this, but I would like to make a comment on this issue. You will be aware that there have been some instances where the Palestinian point of view has been put quite strongly. Ian Sinclair's delegation did that very specifically. Equally, you should take some comfort from the fact that, after an informal delegation went to Israel and Palestine a year or so ago, a group of members of parliament came back and formed a

friends of Palestine group in the parliament, so there are some people who do take an interest.

Resolved (on motion by **Senator Harradine**):

That the subcommittee authorises the publication of the evidence, other than that taken in camera, given before it at the public hearing this day.

Subcommittee adjourned at 4.35 p.m.