



Uniting Church in Australia
SYNOD OF VICTORIA AND TASMANIA

Justice and International Mission Unit
130 Little Collins Street
Melbourne Victoria
Australia, 3000
Telephone: +61-3-9251 5271
Facsimile: +61-3-9251 5241
jim@vic.uca.org.au

17 January 2007

The Secretary
Senate Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee
PO Box 6100
Parliament House
Canberra, ACT, 2600
E-mail: fadt.sen@aph.gov.au

Submission to Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

Inquiry into the nature and conduct of Australia's public diplomacy

The Justice and International Mission Unit, Synod of Victoria and Tasmania, Uniting Church in Australia welcomes this opportunity to make submission on the nature and conduct of Australia's public diplomacy.

The Unit will focus on Australia's public diplomacy as it relates to the areas of human rights and peace-building. The Unit accepts that the Australian Government, and for that matter the majority of the Australian Parliament, is committed to seeing a world where basic human rights are respected and that is free of armed conflict. The Unit sees public diplomacy as one of the tools that the Australian Government has at its disposal to work towards a world where basic human rights are universally respected and it is also a tool that can be used to help prevent armed conflicts. The Unit is of the view that using public diplomacy to help prevent the emergence of armed conflicts and promote non-violent change is preferable to waiting for a situation to reach a crisis point and then use armed intervention, whether this be through a peace-keeping or peace-making operation or through the use of direct armed conflict (as Australia did in Afghanistan and Iraq).

The role of public diplomacy in global non-violent peace-building

Those engaged in non-violent peace-building and peace mediation argue for the effectiveness of non-violent approaches. Public diplomacy has a role to play in these activities. However, by comparison to the funds invested in maintaining a capability for armed intervention in peace-keeping and peace-making operations, public diplomacy (and for that matter non-violent peace-building strategies of all types) receives little financial support from the Australian Government. At least part of the problem would appear to be the difficulty in assessing the impact of public diplomacy in peace-building activities, promoting a culture of human rights and effecting cultural change. Direct armed intervention would appear, and in some cases does, to deliver direct ability to impact on a situation. For example, disarming groups during the intervention in the Solomon Islands. We believe that the sense of control that often results after armed intervention is almost always illusory, as has been the case in Iraq. Armed intervention may only bring about a temporary solution. It is not uncommon for armed conflict to emerge again as soon as the armed intervention is withdrawn and sometimes the armed intervention simply results in a change of roles for the original oppressors and victims. For example, NATO's intervention in Kosovo could be

argued to have resulted in an end to ethnic Albanians being the victims of human rights abuses at the hands of Serbian security forces and replaced it with Serbs and other ethnic minorities being the victims of gross human rights abuses at the hands of armed ethnic Albanian groups such as the Kosovo Liberation Army. We believe that long term non-violent strategies that may include public diplomacy are the surest way to long-term peace with justice.

Need to work with NGOs in the area of public diplomacy

The Unit is not in favour of the Australian Government diverting resources to self-promotion in public relations type exercises. At the same time, the experience of the Unit is that all too often positive initiatives of the Australian Government are met with suspicion by non-government organisations and communities on the ground. For example, churches and non-government organisations in the Philippines that the Unit has had regular dealings with have been suspicious that the motive of the Australian Government in giving aid to the Philippines is to prop up the unpopular Government under President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo and to help cover up corruption in the Government of the Philippines. The Unit continues to reassure such contacts that this is not the case and that Australian aid money currently appears well targeted towards alleviation of poverty and promotion of good governance. At the same time, there often appears to be an attitude of suspicion within the Australian Government that a non-government organisation such as the Justice and International Mission Unit would seek to offer such reassurances to its overseas partners and therefore Australian Government assistance, largely through the provision of information, can at times be difficult to obtain.

The reverse can also be true. The experience of Uniting International Mission, of the Uniting Church in Australia National Assembly, is that many in church communities in Eastern Indonesia have extremely positive views of the Australian Government, seeing it as dedicated to human rights protection and humanitarian assistance. Such views can create unrealistic expectations of what the Australian Government will be actually willing to do for the people living in Eastern Indonesia. For example, it is completely unrealistic to believe that Australia would conduct an armed intervention into Eastern Indonesia to stop a community level armed conflict or protect local communities from human rights abuses carried out by members of the security forces. Again, the Australian Government being more willing to work in collaboration with non-government organisations, both in Australia and overseas, can help ensure that communities have more realistic expectations of what an Australian Government might be willing to do.

Examples of public diplomacy working

The Unit is aware of examples of where Australia's public diplomacy has achieved well deserved recognition. For example, Australia's efforts to rid the world of the scourge of anti-personnel landmines. Australia's role in working towards this end is internationally well recognised, especially in much of the relevant non-government organisation community globally.

The Australian Government's support for programs like Australian Volunteers International is another example of effective public diplomacy. Such programs, partially funded by the Australian Government, allow Australians to travel overseas to assist in community development projects, creating a positive image of Australia and Australians as well as having a concrete and meaningful benefit to the community in which the project is located.

Conclusion

The Australian Government should make greater use of public diplomacy to help build a world in which there is culture that respects basic human rights for all people and in which greater effort is made to resolve potential conflicts before they become armed conflicts that invite an armed response. Such public diplomacy needs to be genuine and accurate about the Australian Government's position and actions. Australia's public diplomacy in the areas of promoting human

rights and peace-building could be enhanced by a greater willingness to work collaboratively with a wider spectrum of Australian and overseas non-government organisations.

Dr Mark Zirnsak
Director
Justice and International Mission Unit
Synod of Victoria and Tasmania
Uniting Church in Australia
130 Little Collins St
Melbourne, Victoria, 3000
Phone: (03) 9251 5265
Fax: (03) 9251 5241