

Australia's human rights record reviewed in Geneva



At the end of this month government officials and non-government organisations will travel to Geneva.

THE event is a Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Australia's human rights performance and will be one of the most important assessments of Australia's human rights record for many years.

The UPR is a process undertaken by the United Nations Human Rights Committee and involves a close look at the human rights records of each of the 192 member states of the United Nations. The UPR process commenced in 2006. The United States was one of the countries whose record was put under the microscope in 2010.

The process involves input from the country under review as to its performance against its human rights obligations arising from the treaties it has adopted and any voluntary commitments it has made. On November 4 2010, the Australian Government submitted its report to the committee. Human rights NGOs in Australia have taken the opportunity to provide an independent but home grown view of Australia's performance.

As well as providing their own submission prepared by a joint working group, NGOs have briefed the representatives of countries on the Human Rights Committee who have shown interest in taking part in the process. At the UPR hearing, these countries will have an opportunity to question Australian

Government representatives, including the Attorney-General of Australia, about the strengths and weaknesses of Australia's performance.

Representatives of Australian NGOs will travel to Geneva to assist in the process. Two excellent lawyers, Liz Snell and Jacqui Zalcborg, both of whom are members of Australian Lawyers for Human Rights, will be in attendance along with representatives from other Australian human rights groups.

The NGO working group wrote to the Attorney-General calling on the Government, as part of the process, to make voluntary commitments to support, promote and protect human rights in the lead up to the review. Voluntary commitments of this kind are a proper part of the review process.

They should involve tangible pledges to take specific actions to protect and promote human rights.

The letter calls for 19 specific voluntary pledges in areas where Australia's performance is perceived to fall below its high aspirations.

The UPR process is really important. Australians generally perceive that we perform really well against the obligations we have undertaken by signing treaties like the Convention Against Torture and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

It is a chance for our Government and our community to look more closely at the areas where we fall short and plan on ways to improve. The fact that other countries will cast a ruler over our performance and report on their findings is also very good for us.

I also think it important from the point of view of the international community. The Human Rights Committee has been rightly criticised over the years for not taking human rights seriously enough and by allowing itself to be distracted by political expediency.

Australia (and its community organisations) have an opportunity by treating its obligations seriously to set an example for other countries whose human rights failings are no more severe than our own.

Hopefully, in a later column, I can bring you news of a very successful UPR process.

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I was thankful most of all that you, Trilby Misso, help people like myself in this situation.

(Ms C.S.)

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