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MEDIA RELEASE

ALHR WELCOMES GOVERNMENT DECISION TO RATIFY CONVENTION AGAINST TORTURE

Australian Lawyers for Human Rights (ALHR) today welcomed the Federal Government's action in tabling a National Interest analysis which records its decision to ratify the United Nations Optional Protocol to the *Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* (OPCAT). ALHR President Stephen Keim SC applauded the move as "a critical step to bringing conditions and practices in Australian detention facilities in line with international standards, and our international human rights obligations, and ultimately, preventing torture and other forms of ill treatment".

Ratification of OPCAT commits Australia to international monitoring measures as well as a National Preventative Mechanism, which promotes a "proactive approach to preventing deprivation, mistreatment or death occurring in custodial situations," Mr Keim said. "Torture, mistreatment and poor detention practices are not issues that only happen 'elsewhere' in countries with poor human rights records, but affect institutions on our own shores. The recent death in custody in the Alice Springs watch house and the Palm Island Coronial Inquest in Queensland serve as important reminders of the very real failings in our detention system, and the need for independent investigators", he said.

The decision represents an important step to deliver on the commitment made in December 2007 by the newly elected Labor Government. "While this renewed resolve from the Gillard Government is encouraging, it is up to both Federal and State governments to see the commitment through with the implementation of reforms on a cooperative and comprehensive basis", Mr Keim said. "We urge the Attorneys-General of the States and Territories to work with the Federal Government to ensure these important human rights reforms are realised". Mr Keim commended the work of the Australian Human Rights Commission in their 2008 Report on Implementing OPCAT as providing a thoughtful framework with which to move forward.

ALHR has been an active advocate of reform on the issue, joining forces with 28 other leading human rights organisations in a December 2011 joint letter urging the newly appointed Attorney-General Roxon to ratify OPCAT. "Our position was then and still remains, that there are serious and well-documented concerns with conditions of detention,

including prisons, mental health facilities and immigration detention,” said Mr Keim, echoing the joint statement, which was signed by Amnesty International, the Public Interest Advocacy Centre, and the Prisoners Legal Service, among others. “There is strong evidence that external scrutiny of places of detention, as required by OPCAT, can deter and help redress torture and other forms of ill treatment, where necessary. Supporting international inspection, as well as national preventative mechanisms, will provide an important external accountability measure and internal mechanisms for promoting transparency and rectifying problems that arise in the detention system”, he said.

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About ALHR

Australian Lawyers for Human Rights is a national network of Australian law students and lawyers active in practising and promoting awareness of human rights. Our organisation has a national membership of over 2,000 people, with active National, State and Territory committees.

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