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Media release

For immediate release 26 July 2016

National Law Group welcomes Royal Commission into NT Youth Detention

Australian Lawyers for Human Rights (ALHR) welcomes Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's announcement this morning calling for a Royal Commission into abuse at the Northern Territory's Don Dale Youth Detention Centre.

ALHR President, Benedict Coyne, said, "The Four Corners report last night made public incredibly disturbing human rights abuses occurring in our midst against the most vulnerable people in our society, our children. The degree of abuse committed by those in the position of power and as proxy parents to these children is truly shocking, disgusting, distressing and utterly inexcusable. These abuses blatantly violate the non-derogable universal right to be free from torture. Australia has ratified both the Convention Against Torture and the Convention on the Rights of the Child and all of this is in flagrant breach of those basic universal rights."

Mr Coyne continued, "While a Royal Commission is a positive step into addressing how and why these brutal human rights violations occurred, it is overwhelmingly clear that more immediate steps must be taken to address this issue including investigating its systemic origins. Juvenile detention must be focused on rehabilitation not punitive measures."

ALHR has also expressed serious concerns that the abuses depicted disproportionately affect Indigenous children and indicate a much broader problem of systemic racism and ongoing institutional abuse.

"This is another strikingly clear indication of why Australia and each of its constituent States and Territories must urgently implement the legal protection of basic universally recognised human rights in the form of a human rights act or bill of rights by which the human rights of all Australians, including youth, are properly and legally protected", Mr Coyne said.

"ALHR calls upon the Australian Government to urgently ratify the *Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture* to demonstrate its commitment to safeguarding the human rights of people deprived of their liberty in detention and allow for the independent international scrutiny of our detention centers, prisons and correctional facilities."

ALHR further calls on the Federal and Northern Territory governments to:

1. Immediately close the Don Dale Youth Detention Centre; and
2. Immediately comply with its obligations under the *Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment* and the *Convention on the Rights of the Child*; and
3. Immediately repeal legislative provisions in the Northern Territory which enable the use of solitary confinement, mechanical chairs, cable ties, weight belts, shackles and spit hoods on children in detention, or at minimum immediately repeal of the *Youth Justice Amendment Act 2016 (NT)* which allows the use of mechanical devices including restraint chairs; and
4. Immediately construct a purpose built youth detention facility that is staffed by adequately trained personnel with a focus on rehabilitation of children; and
5. Create and implement appropriately funded diversionary and education programs to minimise the risk of children ending up in juvenile detention or assist the reintegration into society of those who have been released back into society; and
6. Immediately appoint a Northern Territory Independent Custodial Inspector similar to those appointed in NSW and WA with unfettered access to youth detention centres to ensure that national and international standards are being complied with.

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ALHR was established in 1993 and is a national network of solicitors, barristers, academics, judicial officers and law students who practise and promote international human rights law in Australia. ALHR has active and engaged National, State and Territory committees and a secretariat at La Trobe University Law School in Melbourne. Through advocacy, media engagement, education, networking, research and training, ALHR promotes, practices and protects universally accepted standards of human rights throughout Australia and overseas.