



AUSTRALIAN
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Leading Australian Rights Lawyers Meet with UN Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders in Brisbane

President of Australian Lawyers for Human Rights (ALHR), Benedict Coyne, will meet this week with Mr Michael Forst, the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, to discuss possible violations of the rights of local defenders of human rights. Mr Forst is currently on an official visit to Australia at the invitation of the Government, with a view to gathering first-hand information on the situation of human rights defenders in the country and identifying general trends as detailed in the **attached** briefing note. His main mission as an independent expert is to inform on the risks and threats human rights defenders face on the ground. Mr Forst is scheduled for a number of meetings with various human rights defenders, including those who defend Refugee Rights, Environmental rights, and Indigenous Rights in Queensland at a number of prominent Australian law firms over the next two days.

Mr Coyne stated: "ALHR will identify for the Special Rapporteur the major challenges human rights defenders face in Australia including a lack of goodwill by the Australian and QLD governments to properly legislate to protect universally recognised and basic human rights. The simplest solution is to urgently implement a federal bill of rights, as every other western liberal democracy in the world has done. Why Australia is so staunchly opposed to implementing such basic rights is perplexing!"

Mr Coyne will also share with the Mr Forst the following issues fundamental to the major challenges of addressing violations against human rights defenders in Australia:

- The lack of comprehensive human rights law and inclusion of human rights' considerations in governmental policy generally;
- Enactment of regressive laws restricting the right to peaceful protest and freedom of the press;
- The federal government's ongoing failure to implement a National Action Plan for the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights;
- The need for greater protection of Indigenous landholders and farmers' rights in relation to proposed mining and gas developments and manner in which current arrangements are heavily prejudiced against these defenders.
- The need for an independent federal anti-corruption body;
- The need for a reformed Queensland corruption body that provides proper accountability and oversight to the executive including the Queensland Police Service.

ALHR are taking these issues forward on a national scale. Tasmanian ALHR Convenor, Nicole Sommer, raised many of these issues with Mr Forst at his meeting with Tasmanian human rights defenders in Hobart on Saturday 8 October 2016. Ms Sommer said "The need for legal redress where human rights protections fail is critical. The Tasmanian Government's proposed changes to the *Anti-Discrimination Act 1998* (Tas) to allow hate speech for "religious purposes", contrary to international law and removing critical rights of legal redress. Mr Forst appeared to take on board my submissions that what is needed is legal protection for international human rights law at the domestic level."

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Australian Lawyers for Human Rights (ALHR) is a national association of legal professionals established in 1993 that is active in practising and promoting awareness of international human rights standards in Australia. ALHR has a national membership of Australian lawyers, barristers, judicial officers, legal academics and law students, with active National, State and Territory committees. ALHR seeks to utilise its extensive experience and expertise in the principles and practice of international law and human rights law in Australia in order to: (i) Promote and support lawyers practice of human rights law in Australia; (ii) Promote Federal and State laws across Australia that comply with the principles of international human rights law; (iii) Assist victims of human rights violations in Australia. Through the provision of training, education, publications, CLE courses, conferences, seminars, mentoring and internships, ALHR assists members to continue to develop their knowledge of human rights law and incorporate human rights principles into their areas of legal practice in Australia.