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Australia's Human Rights Score Card

Media Release

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Nearly 200 organisations outline concern for UN over Australia's declining human rights performance

Australia's steadily deteriorating human rights performance has been highlighted in a [major report](#) compiled by nearly 200 organisations around Australia. It will be presented to the United Nation's peak human rights body in the lead up to a major review of Australia that takes place every four years.

Emma Golledge, Acting Director at Kingsford Legal Centre, which is part of a NGO Coalition that has prepared the joint NGO report for the process known as the "Universal Periodic Review", said it was an important opportunity for Australia to engage with the international community to improve issues of concern.

"Increasingly punitive asylum seeker policies, the over-imprisonment of Aboriginal people and the erosion of basic democratic freedoms at both the state and federal level will all come under the spotlight for the international community's scrutiny, and our hope is that Australia will see the benefit of constructively responding to criticism and addressing these important issues," said Ms Golledge.

Australia was last reviewed by the Human Rights Council in 2011, and NGOs welcomed the Government's acceptance of a large number of recommendations and its commitment to translate them into practical action. However, four years on, NGOs are concerned that progress has stalled and key recommendations have fallen by the wayside.

"While we have seen some positive developments in response to recommendations made as part of the last review, including for example the appointment of a federal Children's Commissioner and the adoption of a second action plan under the National Plan to Reduce Violence against Women and their Children, the facts speak for themselves—only 11% of the recommendations have been fully implemented," said Amanda Alford, Deputy Director Policy & Advocacy, National Association of Community Legal Centres, who also coordinated the report.

Legal and institutional protection of human rights is a large focus of the report as are the new counter-terror, metadata, whistleblower and anti-protest laws, said the Human Rights Law Centre's Director of Advocacy, Anna Brown, another coordinator of the report.

"Australia remains the only liberal democracy without a bill or charter of rights and we are witnessing a slow but steady erosion of our basic democratic freedoms. In this context, restrictions on the ability of independent organisations to speak out about human rights violations is cause for growing concern," said Ms Brown.

The report deals with a number of key population groups and human rights issues, including the following areas.

Asylum seekers

“Australia’s asylum seeker policies violate the basic human rights of those who arrive in order to deter others thinking of coming. At a time of unprecedented global need when it comes to refugee protection, Australia should be stepping up to the plate and sharing responsibility rather than using cruel and unlawful measures to shift it,” said Daniel Webb, Director of Legal Advocacy, Human Rights Law Centre.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples

“Fifty-four recommendations from the 2011 Universal Periodic Review report directly related to the human rights of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples,” said Les Malezer, Co-Chair of the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples.

“Australia accepted all but two of these recommendations—in full or in part but has not followed up in good faith. Seven recommendations proposed that Australia consult and cooperate with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples but consultation and collaboration is a glaring failure of government up to this time,” added Mr Malezer.

As part of the process, the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples is calling for Australia to revise national, regional and local constitutions, laws and policies to fully recognise and protect the rights of the Indigenous Peoples in accordance with international human rights standards.

“It is important Australia lives up to its international human rights obligations towards its first people. Rates of family violence, incarceration, child removal and life expectancy are devastating for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and there’s a long way to go to turn this around,” added Antoinette Braybrook, Convenor of National Family Violence Prevention Legal Services.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex people

“Two years after Australia agreed to protect LGBTI people from discrimination at the Universal Periodic Review, laws were passed with bipartisan support, showing how this process can deliver tangible outcomes when Government engages with NGO’s,” said Mr Corey Irlam, spokesperson for the Victorian Gay & Lesbian Rights Lobby.

“This time round we’re hoping to see commitments to end damaging medical interventions against intersex people, further steps taken to recognise gender identity, and equality for our relationships and families,” added Mr Irlam.

People with disability

The report also urges action on a number of problems still faced by people with disability.

“People with disability can be forcibly sterilised, indefinitely detained, and subjected to involuntary treatment and restrictive practices. Unless action is taken to address these issues we will continue to be denied equality and the ability to fully participate in society,” said Ms Rosemary Kayess, spokesperson for the UPR Disability Coordination Group.

Older people

“The need for human rights protections don’t stop when you get older,” said Ian Yates, Chief Executive of COTA Australia.

“With the Intergenerational Report likely to influence this year’s budget, our recommendations to increase

workforce participation through a dedicated plan, tackle ageism and harmonise laws around elder abuse, have never been more important,” added Mr Yates.

Women

“Increased resources are urgently needed to address epidemic levels of sexual assault and family violence in Australia, violence overwhelmingly perpetrated by men against women,” said Liz Snell, Law Reform and Policy Co-ordinator at Women’s Legal Services NSW.

“Achieving substantive equality through equal pay, adequate and affordable childcare, recognition of unpaid work, women in leadership and addressing intersectional and compounding discrimination often experienced by women will significantly help eliminate the underlying systemic contributors to violence against women,” said Helen Dalley-Fisher, Program Manager of one of the National Women’s Alliances, the Equality Rights Alliance.

Poverty and economic, social and cultural rights

“Poverty in Australia has increased since the last review. Current Government policy proposals and economic settings would accelerate this trend, including moves to cut young people off payments for 6 months each year, reductions in assistance to low income families, severe cuts to community services, moves to reduce the adequacy of indexation for Pensions and failure to improve the adequacy of the base rate and indexation of Allowances. In addition, the costs of housing in both the rental and home ownership markets are increasing at alarming levels. We cannot afford to go backwards in our effort to realise the right to an adequate standard of living for all,” said Dr Cassandra Goldie, CEO of the Australian Council for Social Service.

Housing and homelessness

Since Australia’s last Universal Periodic Review, homelessness has increased, housing affordability has worsened, and there continues to be a social housing shortage.

“Australia needs a coordinated housing strategy that recognises housing as a human rights issue. We’re proud to join with a range of frontline housing, homelessness and legal services in calling for measures that will reduce homelessness and work toward all Australians having access to safe, affordable housing,” said Lucy Adams, Manager and Principal Lawyer of Justice Connect Homeless Law.

Policing

The lack of independent investigations of police related deaths and continuing efforts to tackle racism within Australia’s police forces were also covered in the report.

“For Australian police forces to be truly world-class, they must embrace the recommendations of the international community and this starts with police treatment of our most vulnerable –Indigenous people, people with disability, those experiencing mental health crises,” said David Porter, an expert in police accountability at the Redfern Legal Centre.

“Too often vulnerable people are let down by those whose responsibility it is to protect them, and subjected to excessive force or unnecessary arrest,” added Mr Porter.

Australia’s Universal Periodic Review by the UN Human Rights Council will take place in November. The Australian Government will need to lodge its report in July ahead of the review.

A copy of the Joint NGO Report can be found [here](#).

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