



## **United Nations Association of Australia Position Statement on Australia's Candidacy for the Human Rights Council**

The United Nations Association of Australia (UNAA) commends the Australian government's decision to announce candidacy for the Human Rights Council for 2018. The Human Rights Council is the world's peak intergovernmental body on human rights, and Australia is well placed to make an important contribution to upholding human rights and the values of the United Nations.

Australia has held a longstanding commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights. As a founding member of the United Nations, Australia played a key role in drafting the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Australia has consistently contributed forces in support of UN peacekeeping missions, and Australian-led missions in our region demonstrate Australia's commitment to leadership in conflict prevention and peace building. Australia's 2013-2014 term on the United Nations Security Council has demonstrated Australia's ability to take a leadership role in advancing human rights in international negotiations. Notable in this regard is the role that Australia played in securing the unanimous adoption of SC Resolution 2165 to provide cross-border access to Syria for the provision of humanitarian assistance.

In light of this proud history it is important that we acknowledge that in recent years Australia has faced challenges in maintaining the strength of its human rights performance, particularly with respect to policy decisions regarding asylum seekers and refugees. At a time when Australia is seeking membership of the world's peak human rights body, the UNAA formally conveys its concern about these serious and ongoing challenges to Australia's human rights standing.

Membership of the Human Rights Council bestows both privileges and obligations on Member States. General Assembly resolution A/RES/60/251 requires that members of the Council uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights. Consistent with the expectations of Council membership, the UNAA urges the Australian government to consider its candidacy as an opportunity to reinvigorate its commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights, both in Australia and in our region.

### **Australia's Voluntary Pledge**

Australia's candidacy for the Human Rights Council means that its human rights record will now be the subject of increased international scrutiny. General Assembly resolution A/RES/60/251 encourages candidates to make voluntary pledges and commitments about their intended conduct as members of the Human Rights Council. The UNAA encourages the Australian government to commit to actions that will uphold Australia's human rights record, and fulfill all obligations incumbent on Council Member States. The UNAA urges that Australia consider including the following in its pledges:

- A commitment to strengthening Australia's national human rights policy, including a statement of commitment to good government, increased transparency, support for Australia's independent human rights institutions, an affirmation of the important role played by Parliamentary institutions in human rights implementation and oversight, and clarification of the status of Australia's Human Rights Action Plan.
- An acknowledgment that Australia's current asylum seeker policies are widely seen as controversial and failing to uphold the human rights of asylum seekers and refugees and, as a matter of priority, a formal commitment to cooperate with the UNHCR to pursue regional solutions.



- An action plan to demonstrate and reaffirm Australia's respect for the processes and monitoring mechanisms of the United Nations by:
  - continuing to provide financial support to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights;
  - supporting constructive efforts to improve the work of the Council (including ensuring adequate opportunities for the participation of NHRIs and civil society);
  - committing to upholding the principles enshrined in the human rights treaties to which Australia is party;
  - responding constructively and in good faith to the concluding observations, recommendations and views of treaty monitoring bodies and the recommendations of special procedures; and
  - by nominating independent experts for election to the human rights treaty bodies.
- A commitment to transparency by making Australia's pledge public, for the information of Australian civil society and for the information of all Member States.
- A commitment to accountability by participating in the 2016/2017 Human Rights Council elections pledging event, jointly organised by the International Service for Human Rights and Amnesty International. This event provides candidates with the opportunity to elaborate upon how they plan to realise their pledges if elected to Council.

The credibility that Australia gained during its recent term on the Security Council means that Australia is well placed to pursue election to the Human Rights Council. If elected, Australia might usefully work to broker mechanisms for enhanced connections and reporting between the Security Council and the Human Rights Council. Australia might also demonstrate leadership by encouraging Member States to increase opportunities for civil society organisations to make meaningful contributions to Human Rights Council processes.

The UNAA also notes that Australia has the potential to take a leading role in the Pacific region by promoting a strengthening of the rule of law and encouraging increased cooperation with United Nations monitoring mechanisms. Australia might work to strengthen the role of special procedures, for example, by encouraging neighbouring states to extend standing invitations to special Rapporteurs. In addition, Australia's membership of the Council might allow Australia to play a leadership role with respect to country situations in our region. Early attention to human rights abuses against women and girls, for example, and addressing the underlying inequalities and culture of impunity for these abuses, might mitigate an escalation of conditions that lead to civil conflict.

Australia's announcement of its candidacy represents an affirmation of Australia's commitment to the United Nations. The UNAA commends this commitment, and extends its support to the Australian government in its pledge to uphold the highest standards in the protection and promotion of human rights.

United Nations Association of Australia

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