
Human Rights Groups Urge Commonwealth to Give More Space to Civil Society

Contributed by The Exclusive News Paper
Wednesday, 02 December 2009

As the 2009 Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) draws to a close civil society groups will be asking how much impact their own deliberations in the days immediately prior to the CHOGM had upon their leaders' discussions.

The question of civil society impact had been discussed during the Commonwealth People's Forum's Human Rights Assembly (held in Trinidad and Tobago from 23-25 November 2009) the purpose of which was to give space to civil society to feed into the Heads of Government meeting, through the development of a statement of civil society concerns. However, participants expressed frustration with the process in which they were engaged and called for the creation of predictable and transparent processes to enable civil society to engage more effectively with the Commonwealth. Despite repeated assurances in past CHOGM communiqués that the work of civil society is valued, delegates expressed a strong sense of exclusion. The Human Rights Assembly also discussed the broader question of the difficulties human rights defenders have in making their voices heard, not only through exclusion from official decision-making processes, but also through abuses ranging from death and detention to administrative restrictions on forming an NGO. It was noted that human rights defenders are those groups and individuals who work on the ground to implement the human rights standards and values that the Commonwealth aspires to. As long as these defenders are not able to carry out their work safely the Commonwealth's own work is correspondingly more difficult. The Assembly called on the Heads of Government as a matter of urgency to create effective protection mechanisms to safeguard those who defend human rights. Until it does so the Commonwealth is guilty of ignoring a crucial partner and leaving defenders exposed to abuses of the worst kind. The theme of the 2009 CHOGM was Partnering for More Equitable and Sustainable Futures. The conclusion from the Human Rights Assembly was that if the Commonwealth is to be seen as taking the concept of partnerships seriously then it must address the question of how it engages with civil society, both in terms of the protections it offers to those working on the ground and in how it engages civil society in its own decision-making processes. For more information contact Heather Collister (heather.collister@gmail.com – Phone 91 11 43180200).