



# AUSTRALIA

**Tenth Session of the United Nations  
Human Rights Council**

**Statement by**

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Mr President, High Commissioner, Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

It is an honour to address the 10<sup>th</sup> session of the Human Rights Council – the principal human rights body of the United Nations system.

We have engaged constructively in the work of the Council with a view to ensuring that it meets its responsibilities with respect to advancing the cause of human rights.

In this regard, we have welcomed the valuable role that the Universal Periodic Review mechanism is now playing and the impetus it provides to states to engage in detailed national consultations with stakeholders.

As the first Australian Minister to address the Human Rights Council, let me take this opportunity to congratulate High Commissioner Pillay on her appointment and to offer our full support to her and her office in the execution of their duties.

I also wish to thank Ambassador Uhomoibhi, the President of the Council, as well as the past presidents, for the tremendous leadership that each has provided in these formative years of the Council.

Mr President, High Commissioner,

Australia's democracy has the protection of human rights as its cornerstone. We are deeply committed to promoting and protecting human rights both at home and abroad.

At home, the Government recently launched a National Human Rights Consultation that is allowing Australians from all walks of life to give their views on how we can best promote and protect human rights.

The Australian government is serious about tackling our pressing human rights challenges, in particular past failures over the treatment of Indigenous Australians.

One year ago, Australia's Prime Minister, Mr Rudd delivered the National Apology to Indigenous Australians for past government policies that resulted in profound grief, suffering and loss for Indigenous Australians.

Since delivering the National Apology, the government has been making progress towards improving the lives of Indigenous Australians in practical ways.

Last week, the Prime Minister delivered the first annual report to the Australian Parliament on *Closing the Gap on Indigenous Disadvantage: the Challenge for Australia*. This report sets out the long-term framework for a new effort to tackle this great, national challenge.

At the heart of our strategy are six ambitious targets for closing the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians across urban, rural and remote areas.

Under the strategy, our targets will be to close the gap in life expectancy within a generation and halve the gap in mortality rates for Indigenous children under five within a decade.

We have also set targets to ensure all Indigenous four years olds in remote communities have access to early childhood education within five years and to halve the gap in reading, writing and numeracy achievements for Indigenous children within a decade as well as the gap for Indigenous students in year 12 attainment or equivalent attainment rates by 2020.

Lastly, we have set the ambitious target of halving the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a decade.

Importantly, in a federal structure such as Australia's, we have the agreement of the Australian Commonwealth and all state and territory governments to meeting these ambitious goals.

We do not underestimate the challenges we face in addressing the serious disadvantage of our Indigenous peoples. But Australia is determined to tackle them and has committed \$4.6 billion to this end in 2008.

Mr President, High Commissioner,

Other significant achievements for Australia over the last year include legislative reform to end discrimination against same-sex couples and their families.

We are also working towards a National Disability Strategy based on the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The Australian Government is strongly committed to recognising and advancing the rights of people with disabilities and to being a regional and international leader for people with disabilities and their families. In November 2008, the Government launched Australia's first explicitly disability-inclusive international development strategy, 'Development for All'.

The Strategy will play a key part in working to reduce poverty and hasten progress towards the Millennium Development goals, designed to improve the well-being of the world's poorest people by 2015.

Let me take the opportunity to welcome Australian Professor Ron McCallum's election as one of the founding members of the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which met for the first time only days ago here in Geneva.

Over the past year, we have taken a number of other significant steps to promote human rights mechanisms and respect for human rights standards. We have issued a standing invitation to Special Procedures, and acceded to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

The Government is also committed to taking the steps necessary to become a party to the Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture and to consider accession to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Mr President, High Commissioner,

Australia is backing its support for the work of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, including in the Asia-Pacific region, by substantially increasing this year's funding to the Office by almost 60 per cent. A significant proportion of this funding is unearmarked, to provide the High Commissioner with flexibility to respond to human rights challenges as they emerge.

We are also lifting our development assistance efforts in key MDG areas that are integral to advancing human rights such as health, basic education, water, sanitation, disability-inclusive development, the environment and adaptation to climate change.

In addition, we are funding projects promoting human rights in 19 countries across the Asia-Pacific, Africa and the Middle East. These funds will assist civil society organisations to promote good governance, access to justice, gender equality, disability rights, child protection and to combat human trafficking.

Mr President, High Commissioner,

The steps taken by the Australian government over the past year demonstrate our serious commitment to human rights; to their implementation at home; and to working with others bilaterally and multilaterally to ensure their implementation abroad.