



Australian Government

Australian Government response to the
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and
Trade:

First periodic report on Human Rights: *Final report into
certain aspects of the Department of Foreign Affairs and
Trade Annual Report 2019-20*

June 2022

Introduction

The Australian Government welcomes the opportunity to respond to the First periodic report on Human Rights: *Final report into certain aspects of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade Annual Report 2019-20* of the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade (the Committee).

The Government recognises and appreciates the work of the Committee. This first report of its kind, with six recommendations, focuses on international human rights issues and Australian Government efforts to address them. The Government has carefully considered the report and accepts three, partially accepts one, notes ones and agrees one of the Committee's recommendations.

Australia has a proud history of protecting and promoting human rights globally, and implementation of the Committee's recommendations will contribute to the Government's response to situations of international concern involving human rights violations and abuses.

Given the range of recommendations, the Government's consideration of the recommendations includes close scrutiny of Australia's existing efforts to address these international human rights concerns. The Government's response to the Committee's report and recommendations will ensure that Australia's international human rights work continues to play an important role in our foreign and domestic policies to defend our values and the international rules-based order.

The Government thanks the Committee for its work in preparing this report, including considering reports, receiving private briefings and holding public hearings.

Response to the recommendations

Recommendation 1

The Committee recommends that the Government take note that each year the Committee will:

- *adopt an inquiry into the annual report of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade;*
- *refer this annual report inquiry to the Human Rights Sub-Committee, to enable the Sub-Committee to hold public hearings and report to the parliament on important human rights issues; and*
- *prepare an annual report on the activities of the Human Rights Sub-Committee for presentation to the parliament.*

Response:

- The Government notes this recommendation.

Recommendation 2

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government work with Australian universities to apply the November 2021 University Foreign Interference Taskforce Guidelines and publish annually a report documenting incidents of harassment, intimidation and censorship affecting international students at Australian universities, and steps taken by the universities to counter those threats.

Response:

- The Government partially accepts this recommendation.

If clandestine, it can be difficult to establish foreign interference as the motivating factor for harassment, intimidation and censorship. The Government is working with the sector to define reporting arrangements on the implementation of the revised University Foreign Interference Taskforce (UFIT) Guidelines.

Recommendation 3

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government work with Australian universities under the November 2021 University Foreign Interference Taskforce Guidelines to establish a mechanism for students at Australian universities to safely report harassment, intimidation, pressures of censorship or self-censorship, and acts of retaliation involving foreign governments.

Response:

- The Government accepts this recommendation.

Individual students are able to anonymously report instances of foreign interference on campus through the National Security Hotline. Through ongoing outreach efforts, Home Affairs and ASIO will continue to promote the National Security Hotline and NITRO (Notifiable Incidents, Threats and Reportable Observations) as reporting mechanisms for suspected instances of foreign interference.

Recommendation 4

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government advocate through all available channels and measures for the restoration of peace in Tigray.

Response:

- The Government accepts this recommendation.

Throughout the course of the recent conflict, the Australian Government repeatedly called on all parties to cease hostilities and work towards a negotiated solution. The Australian Government welcomed the Ethiopian Government's announcement on 24 March 2022 of an immediate cessation of hostilities, and the Tigray People's Liberation Front's subsequent announcement that it will abide by the ceasefire. We continue to call on all parties to work towards an enduring peace in Tigray.

Recommendation 5

The Committee recommends that the Australian Government consider increasing Australia's humanitarian assistance to respond to the crisis and continue to provide consular assistance to Australians in Ethiopia.

Response:

- The Government accepts this recommendation.

The Australian Government remains deeply concerned by the humanitarian situation in Tigray and across northern Ethiopia, with millions of people in need of life-saving support. Australia's contribution in 2021 of \$6 million to the World Food Programme and the International Committee of the Red Cross, and our deployment of humanitarian experts, reflects our commitment to supporting people affected by the recent conflict. Following the ceasefire announced on 24 March 2022, humanitarian convoys with vital supplies have started to reach Tigray. Australia continues to assess humanitarian need and access across northern Ethiopia. Further humanitarian contributions will be considered as part of Australia's continuous review of humanitarian need globally.

The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade continues to provide consular assistance to Australians in Ethiopia as required and in accordance with the *Consular Services Charter*.

Recommendation 6

The Committee recommends that the Government note that, to ensure community voices are heard and important human rights issues are placed on the public record and reported to parliament, the Committee will:

- *hold an annual public hearing roundtable on a human rights issue or issues; and*
- *include evidence heard at this public hearing roundtable in the Human Rights Sub-Committee's annual report to the parliament (see Recommendation 1).*

Response:

- The Government agrees this recommendation.