

**United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues 2017**

**Australian Statement**

**Item 10**

**Interactive dialogue with the Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples with regard to indigenous human rights defenders**

**Delivered by Ms Rachel O'Connor, Assistant Secretary, Strategy Policy and Coordination Branch, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet**

Thank you Madam Chair

I would like to thank the Special Rapporteur for her recent visit to Australia.

We acknowledge her interim report and look forward to the recommendations that she will make in her final report.

The Australian Prime Minister in his Closing the Gap statement to Parliament this year reaffirmed the commitment to work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

We acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be at the centre of decision making, creating local solutions to best meet needs on the ground.

We are resetting the relationship to one of genuine partnership, based on a development approach that will support the social and economic empowerment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

We are working with National Congress of Australia's First Peoples as well as the leaders of the Redfern Alliance.

We are supporting the Empowered Communities initiative, developed by Indigenous leaders, which aims to strengthen local leadership and governance to build prosperous and safe communities as well as working to support local regional governance models.

We are proud of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet's Regional Network which takes decision making to the local level and which supports active engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and stakeholders.

I ask the Special Rapporteur for her advice regarding engaging with indigenous human rights defenders.

Australia has a vibrant and diverse civil society which plays a fundamental role in promoting and protecting human rights in Australia. The exercise of freedom of expression and opinion by civil society is a foundation of Australia's strong liberal and pluralistic democracy.

Australian governments readily and actively engage with civil society on a range of political, economic and social issues. Although governments may not always agree with the views of civil society, they welcome vigorous community debate and the opportunity for civil society to express their views.

The Australian Government welcomed the visit by the Special Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders in 2016, and will consider the recommendations when his report is presented in March 2018.