UNited Nations General Assembly
30 October 2013

Third Committee

Promotion and Protection of Human Rights

Statement by Ms Tanisha Hewanpola, First Secretary
Permanent Mission of Australia to the United Nations

(Check against delivery)

Thank you Mr President.

Australia firmly holds that all people are entitled to respect, dignity and legal protection regardless of their age, race, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or any other distinguishing characteristic. Human rights are inherent, universal and indivisible. They apply to us all equally. And they serve as a constant reminder that irrespective of our birth places, backgrounds and circumstances, at our most fundamental we must all rely on the same basic protections and rights.

Australia is home to a diversity of peoples, with a multitude of faiths and beliefs. Freedom of religion or belief is highly valued and is protected by our Constitution and reflected in our laws.
Naturally the rights of those belonging to religious minorities must be protected. We unequivocally deplore all acts of violence based on discrimination against a person’s religion or beliefs. However, we equally deplore those that are driven by intolerance for the freedom to hold opinions and the right to freedom of expression. Governments have a responsibility to support the right of all people to hold an opinion and to express it freely. These freedoms are basic and must only be restricted in the most exceptional of circumstances, and only with appropriate safeguards.

Governments must also encourage healthy community dialogue on cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity, in a way that allows for the peaceful and respectful expression of opinions and exchange of views.

Mr President

The scale of human suffering in the Syrian Arab Republic is completely unacceptable. There have been gross violations and abuses of human rights and humanitarian law by all sides in the conflict. The evidence shows that human rights violations perpetrated by the Syrian authorities have been systematic and widespread and, in some cases, have amounted to crimes against humanity. All parties to the conflict, and particularly the Syrian Government, must respect their legal obligations and protect the rights of the vulnerable. Those responsible for committing crimes in Syria must be held to account – we cannot allow the culture of impunity that has prevailed in Syria to continue. The international community has also made its expectation clear, that safe and unhindered access for humanitarian organisations must be provided throughout the country. And the prospects
for a solution to this crisis would be maximised by the Syrian Government and opposition groups participating constructively at the proposed Geneva II conference and developing a credible political transition for Syria.

Australia welcomed Iranian President Rouhani’s statements committing to improving civil rights, and protecting the rights of women and minorities in Iran. We look forward to the Iranian Government translating these words into concrete action. Iran’s recent release of political prisoners is a positive step, but serious human rights abuses remain widespread. We reiterate our concerns regarding executions, particularly of minors, restrictions on civil and political rights and persecution of ethnic and religious minorities, including Arab Iranians, Baha’is, Christian converts, Gonabadi dervishes and Sunni Muslims. We continue to urge Iran to engage in a transparent manner with UN human rights mechanisms, including with the Special Rapporteur on Iran.

Australia remains deeply concerned at the ongoing instability, violence and human rights violations and abuses occurring in eastern Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Central African Republic. There is a real opportunity in the DRC to break the cycle of violence with the implementation of the Peace, Security and Cooperation Framework. In the CAR, we remain deeply concerned at what has been described as a total breakdown of law and order, and climate of impunity for egregious human rights violations and abuses. Both situations require continued urgent international attention. Australia calls on leaders in both countries to implement their commitments to restore peace and security and to take all necessary measures to protect human rights.
In our own region, we remain deeply concerned about serious and systematic human rights abuses in the Democratic People’s Republic of Korea. The use of arbitrary detention, torture and coercion for political purposes is contrary to the inalienable rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights instruments. We urge the DPRK to engage constructively with the Special Rapporteur and to cooperate with the UN Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights in the DPRK.

Australia is encouraged by the recent positive steps taken by Fiji to return to democracy. We look forward to continued progress relating to freedoms of expression, media and association.

Australia welcomes the significant political and economic reforms in Myanmar over last two years as part of its democratic transition. While the process is far from complete, the progress is significant. Efforts to secure preliminary ceasefires with armed ethnic groups are an important step towards achieving sustainable nationwide peace. We welcome President Thein Sein’s commitment release all political prisoners by the end of this year. More needs to be done, particularly to address the underlying causes of ethnic and sectarian unrest in parts of Myanmar, including in Rakhine State. We urge the Myanmar Government to ensure that the fundamental human rights of all people living in Myanmar are fully respected.
Mr President

Human rights apply to all. They are universal and indivisible, interrelated and interdependent. As States we cannot and must not arbitrarily pick and choose to whom they apply, or how they apply – whether to individuals, communities or groups. Our responsibility is the promotion, protection and realisation of those rights.

We must always remember that all human beings are born free and equal, and in dignity, and with rights.