

Where to now for the

United Nations?

Australia's relations with the United Nations are under review, with a wide-ranging public inquiry by the Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade. The Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Senator Alan Ferguson, said that the Committee is identifying reforms that might be necessary to maximise the effectiveness of Australia's future role in the United Nations.

Inquiry scope

Senator Ferguson said that during the inquiry nothing would be precluded from either submissions or hearings just because other parliamentary committees had held inquiries into related matters.

"It is the first time the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee has decided it should have a really comprehensive look at both the United Nations, its structure, its role and what Australia's role and response should be to the perceived changes that exist.

"One of the reasons for having such broad terms of reference is that you're not actually sure where it's going to lead you and we need to give as wide a range of people as possible some cause to give us evidence or to write submissions to the inquiry," Senator Ferguson said.

He went on to say that the Committee would be "very interested to hear from people who are highly critical of the United Nations and those who are highly supportive of the United Nations. We'll be interested in those who think the role should change; perhaps that there are other things the UN could do well or Australians in their role within the United Nations could do better".

He invited people to comment, for instance, on issues such as whether the UN protected human rights in East Timor or whether the UN should have a standing army. He also invited people to talk about UN funding, "one of the greatest problems the UN has".

Internal disputes

An initiating factor for the parliamentary inquiry into the United Nations was the need to examine the implications of increasing intervention in internal disputes, Senator Alan Ferguson said.

"There is a sense of frustration. It is frustrating for member nations to sit by and watch what they know is a human tragedy taking place, knowing that the United Nations has to wait until they are invited to come into the country before they can prevent human rights abuses.

"While we agree on certain rights of national sovereignty – and so we should – when does a country go beyond the bounds of civility in relation to national sovereignty? The world should protect the citizens of the world because, as well as the international rights we have, if you live in the global village you have a responsibility to the other people who live there as well.

"It takes so long for any remedies to be put in place when we know there is a human tragedy taking place. When do you decide to interfere with the sovereignty of a national border?"

Visit to East Timor

As a precursor to the inquiry on the United Nations and to assist the Committee's other inquiry into *The Suitability of the Australian Army for Peacetime, Peacekeeping and War*, a delegation of Committee members visited East Timor on 2 December 1999. The delegation held discussions with Major-General Peter Cosgrove and other members of INTERFET, Timorese leaders and organisations, as well as United Nations personnel and personnel of non-government organisations. It also examined Australia's contribution to the INTERFET operation.

United Nations Association welcomes inquiry

The National President of the United Nations Association of Australia, the Hon Professor Margaret Reynolds welcomed the inquiry and urged people to contribute.

"Over the past few months, Australians have witnessed the significance of their Government working in close cooperation with the United Nations peacekeeping process to protect the East Timorese," she said. "Therefore it is timely that the Parliament has called for public submissions on the role of the United Nations. I would urge organisations, individuals and schools to contribute to this important debate by commenting on their particular sphere of interest.

*'need to examine
the implications of
intervention in disputes'*

"The United Nations is influential for all Australians in setting standards, so it is essential that we participate in dialogue to enhance Australia's partnership within the international community."



Major-General Peter Cosgrove – worked in close cooperation with the UN peacekeeping process to protect the East Timorese. Photograph courtesy of Department of Defence.

Submissions and more information

Although submissions to the inquiry closed on 21 February 2000, interested individuals and groups can contact the committee secretariat to discuss an extension to the closing date.

Further information on the inquiry may be obtained by contacting the secretariat for an information booklet or by visiting the UN Sub-committee's web site.

Telephone: (02) 6277 2313
Facsimile: (02) 6277 2221
Email: jscfadt@aph.gov.au

Web site: www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/jfadt/U_Nations/UNIndex.htm

Those interested in the United Nations can also visit:
The UN's web site: www.un.org
The UNAA's web site: www.unaa.org.au

Terms of Reference

On 15 November 1999, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, the Hon Alexander Downer MP, requested the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade to inquire into and report on the following Terms of Reference:

- The increasing demand for and provision of peacekeeping operations to address internal disputes within states and the subsequent need for humanitarian relief and support for refugees;
- The role of the United Nations in the period of transition following peacekeeping operations and in the reconstruction of civil societies;
- The implications of increasing intervention in internal disputes for national sovereignty, as defined under Article 2 of the Charter of the UN;
- The suitability of developing a standing army for the United Nations;
- The possible devolution of responsibility for restoring and maintaining peace to regionally based UN operations and coalitions-of-the-willing;

- The capacity of the UN to protect human rights as a basic requirement of the Charter, as preventive diplomacy and to address war crimes and crimes of genocide;
- The viability of the International Criminal Court;
- The proposals for reform of the structure of the UN, in particular the Security Council, the specialised agencies, the supporting bureaucracy and the relationship between the security and humanitarian/human rights arms of the organisation;
- The funding shortfall; and
- Australia's role in and response to the United Nations.

Visit to Australia by the Secretary-General of the United Nations

The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Mr Kofi Annan, met with Committee members during his visit to Australia in February 2000. A full report and update on progress of the inquiry will appear in the next edition of *About the House*.



Mr Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations (right) with Senator Alan Ferguson, Chair of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade.