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Promoting Human Rights Education

Asif Khan

THE ancient British university of Oxford will be the setting for a Commonwealth conference on human rights next month. The meeting is the Commonwealth's early contribution to the United Nations decade on human rights education which began this year and will end in 2005.

It has been called to create momentum in Commonwealth countries for developing education and training programmes in human rights. Another aim is to provide practical guidelines on developing strategies for such programmes at national, regional and international levels.

The conference will be attended by public officials whose work touches on the promotion and protection of human rights, including judges, public prosecutors, lawyers and officials involved in the administration of justice.

Also attending will be heads of human rights institutions, foreign service officials, educators and trainers, curricula developers and legislators.

They will be joined by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), international agencies, including the UN Centre for Human Rights and Unesco, and representatives of the media whose role is seen as crucial in drawing attention to policies which affect the full enjoyment of human rights.

Arranged by the Commonwealth Secretariat's Human Rights Unit (HRU), the meeting will be held at Christ Church, an Oxford college, from September 11-14.

It will look at existing national and international efforts on human rights

education. It will examine areas of coverage for education and training, including internationally-recognised standards, and the role of NGOs in the teaching of human rights.

Other items for discussion include the role and duties of public officials; education and access to justice, national plans of action and strategies, human values as a vital element in respecting human rights and agenda for education to the year 2005.

The meeting, the first of its kind, will pay particular attention to teaching about the rights of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups such as women and children, the disabled and other minorities.

Speakers will include Mr Justice P N Bhagwati, a former Chief Justice of India and a champion of human rights, who led a Commonwealth team to observe the recent general election in St Kitts-Nevis in the Caribbean.

Professor Reg Austin of Zimbabwe, director of the Secretariat's Legal and Constitutional Affairs Division of which HRU forms part, will welcome the delegates and outline the Secretariat's work programme in human rights.

The programme results from a mandate from Commonwealth heads of government who have attached great importance to the observance of human rights as reflected in the Harare Commonwealth Declaration adopted at their two-yearly summit in Zimbabwe in 1991.

The declaration reaffirmed the leaders' commitment to work in specific areas, almost all of which have implications for the promotion and

protection of human rights, including democracy, independent judiciary, the rule of law and accountable government.

They pledged the Commonwealth and its members to work with renewed vigour to protect and promote democratic processes and institutions and fundamental human rights such as equal rights and opportunities for all citizens regardless of gender, race, colour, creed or political belief.

The Secretariat established HRU in 1985 to promote human rights within the Commonwealth and to ensure that the international organisation itself took account of human rights considerations in its work.

The unit, which does not have an investigative or enforcement function, seeks to create greater awareness and support for human rights within the Commonwealth through various activities.

It provides practical assistance to member governments in the promotion of and respect and understanding of human rights.

It encourages exchange of information and experiences between those responsible for promoting human rights through the establishment of formal and informal networks and by holding regular meetings, seminars and training workshops.

It commissions studies and reports on issues relating to the subject. It has produced training manuals for public officials and others concerned with the promotion of human rights in the Commonwealth.

It publishes a newsletter, Human Rights Update, which covers international activities in the field, besides reporting on its own work.

A sister publication, the Commonwealth Law Bulletin, includes details of Commonwealth human rights legislation and contributions from HRU.

Christine Mulindwa-Matovu, an international lawyer from Uganda who heads the unit, expects representatives from at least 40 Commonwealth countries at Oxford.

"We hope the conference will come up with a framework for developing and implementing comprehensive education and training programmes," said Mrs Mulindwa-Matovu, previously head of the social and human rights unit in Uganda's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. "It is desirable that these programmes are both practicable and sustainable."

She added: "The role of human rights education, training and public information has long been recognised as the key to creating awareness of human rights. Without awareness, it is difficult to respect, promote, protect, assert or to enforce human rights."

"Our ultimate aim is to evolve a culture of human rights whereby all members of society, including policy makers, defenders and protectors, victims and potential victims and violators and potential violators are aware of their rights and those of others as well as their responsibilities to society."

"The best way to create this awareness is through education and training. We hope the conference will go a long way towards achieving that goal."

- Commonwealth Feature