

15 December 2017

## Civil society groups welcome Australia's ratification of torture prevention treaty

An alliance of civil society groups today welcomed the [Commonwealth Attorney General's announcement](#) that Australia had ratified an international human rights treaty known as the UN Optional Protocol to the Convention Against Torture (OPCAT).

"Ratification of this treaty is a highly significant moment in protecting the rights of the most segregated and isolated people in society," said Ngila Bevan, Co-Chief Executive Officer of People With Disability Australia.

The treaty will apply to all places of detention including prisons, police cells, immigration detention and secure mental health, aged care and disability facilities. By ratifying OPCAT, Australia will commit to establishing a 'national preventative mechanism' to visit places of detention, make recommendations and report publicly on its findings and views.

Alina Leikin, from the Human Rights Law Centre, said: "We congratulate the Australian Government for this important human rights commitment ahead of taking its seat on the Human Rights Council. Abuse thrives behind closed doors. Independent inspections can help prevent mistreatment by shining a light on places of detention. However, it will be incumbent on our governments to allow inspections across all places where people are deprived of their liberty and to act on recommendations to prevent abuse."

Corinne Dobson, co-founder of the Australia OPCAT Network and Director of Policy and Research at the St Vincent de Paul Society, said: "From the abuse of children at Don Dale, to the degrading treatment of older residents at the Oakden mental health facility, we've seen how things can go tragically wrong. OPCAT provides a unique opportunity to prevent such instances of abuse and neglect – not just reacting after abuses occur."

The OPCAT network noted that whilst ratification was a crucial and symbolic first step, much work remained to be done to make the treaty operational. Australia has elected under the terms of the treaty to postpone its substantive obligations for three years in order to get the domestic monitoring framework up and running.

"While ratification of OPCAT provides an opportunity to prevent abuse and neglect in places of detention, this opportunity will amount to nothing unless it's grasped by government and the necessary legislative, funding and operational changes are made," said Ms Dobson.

The OPCAT network called on governments at both Commonwealth and State/Territory levels to engage with civil society groups when designing the oversight framework.

"Many civil society groups have worked in closed environments and have extensive expertise and creative ideas, furthermore, they can bring valuable insights into what persons deprived of their liberty experience in detention," Ms Bevan stated. "While ratification is an important symbol of the Australian Government's commitment to human rights, robust implementation is crucial to ensure that all people residing in closed environments are respected and safe from harm."

### FOR FURTHER MEDIA COMMENT:

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**ENDORSED BY:**

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- Advocacy for Inclusion (ACT)
- Asylum Seeker Advocacy Group
- Australian College of Mental Health Nurses
- Australian Council of Social Service
- Civil Liberties Australia
- Community Mental Health Australia
- Disabled People's Organisations Australia
- Human Rights Council of Australia
- Human Rights Law Centre
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services
- National Association of Community Legal Centres
- National Ethnic Disability Alliance (NEDA)
- National Justice Project
- New South Wales Council for Civil Liberties
- People With Disability Australia (PWDA)
- Public Health Association of Australia
- Queensland Advocacy Incorporated
- Refugee Council of Australia
- St Vincent de Paul Society National Council
- UNICEF Australia
- Victorian Foundation for Survivors of Torture Inc.
- Women With Disabilities Australia