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**Op-ed: Andrew Barnes, Australian High Commissioner to Ghana**

**A beacon of Human Rights - promoting stronger institutions and capacity building**

Every year on 10 December, we celebrate Human Rights day in honour of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations General Assembly, under the Presidency of former Australian Foreign Minister Dr H V Evatt, in 1948.

Human Rights Day is also the final day of the sixteen days of activism against gender based violence, which begins on 25 November – the International Day to End Violence Against Women. Such activism from both institutions and individuals alike works to demonstrate that no matter where we live, we are entitled to the most basic fundamentals of being born free and equal in dignity and rights, with the right to life and liberty amongst others.

Australia prides itself as a champion of Human Rights. We were one of eight nations to draft the original declaration that we now commemorate on Human Rights Day. We were also a founding member of the United Nations and we believe that all states should be treated equally, no matter their size. Next year we will stand for election to the United Nations Human Rights Council, in an endeavour to advance human rights in five vital areas: gender equality; good governance; freedom of expression; the rights of indigenous peoples: and strong national human rights institutions and capacity building.

This Human Rights Day I want to take the opportunity to honour unsung heroes in the defence of human rights: national human rights institutions (NHRI). Although perhaps a less trendy aspect of human rights promotion, NHRIs are at the forefront of defending the rights of citizens around the globe. NHRIs independently monitor the effective implementation of international human rights standards, both providing feedback to governments and the international community, as well as offering a way for citizens to air grievances.

The Paris Principles of 1991 (adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1993) identified six criteria that national human rights institutions should meet in order to be effective including: a clearly defined and broad-based mandate based on universal human rights standards; [autonomy](http://www.asiapacificforum.net/resources/paris-principles-criteria-autonomy/) from government; [independence](http://www.asiapacificforum.net/resources/paris-principles-criteria-independence/) guaranteed by legislation or the constitution; [pluralism](http://www.asiapacificforum.net/resources/paris-principles-criteria-pluralism/), including membership that broadly reflects their society; [adequate resources](http://www.asiapacificforum.net/resources/paris-principles-criteria-resources/); and [adequate powers of investigation](http://www.asiapacificforum.net/resources/paris-principles-criteria-adequate-powers-investigation/).

Ghana, a signatory of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, has its own NHRI in the form of the Commission on Human Rights and Administrative Justice (CHRAJ) established in 1993. The CHRAJ is mandated to promote and protect universal human rights and freedoms which include civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights. Every person who comes before the Commission is offered free services and the opportunity “to present his or her case through a process that is fair, just and transparent.”

I would like to ask Ghanaians to take the opportunity today to reflect on the critical work done by the CHRAJ, and to consider the vital importance of ensuring such an institution is allowed the necessary conditions to perform its work to a high standard.

To all human rights defenders and national human rights institutions working for stronger societies – we thank you for your tireless efforts to defend our rights. May you continue to be beacons of human rights for us all.