

Ministerial Group on Small States, Report of the Chairperson

Introduction

1. The Commonwealth Ministerial Group on Small States held its second Meeting on 9 November 1995 at Auckland on the eve of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting. The Meeting was chaired by the Rt Hon Don McKinnon, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, New Zealand. Representatives of 41 member governments, together with those of the Cook Islands, Nauru and Niue, and observers from the CARICOM and the South Pacific Forum Secretariats attended the Meeting.
2. In his introductory remarks, the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku, highlighted the major items on the draft Agenda, drew attention to the special problems faced by small states, especially their economic and political vulnerability, informed Ministers of the work the Commonwealth Secretariat was doing in support of small states, and expressed his confidence that the Meeting would result in the identification of practical proposals for action.
3. Following his election, the Chairperson noted it was appropriate that the Meeting was being held in a region with such a large number of small states. He particularly welcomed the participation of representatives from the Cook Islands, Nauru and Niue as well the Secretaries-General of CARICOM and the South Pacific Forum Secretariat. The Chairperson urged participants to focus on priority areas in order to assist the Commonwealth Secretariat in addressing the specific problems of small states. He also suggested the Meeting might wish to consider the composition and role of both the Ministerial and the Consultative Groups.
4. The Group adopted the draft Agenda without amendment. The main themes of the Agenda were introduced by the following speakers: the Hon Vui Vilamu, Minister of Labour, Western Samoa; the Hon Seymour Mullings, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade, Jamaica; the Hon Fathulla Jameel, Foreign Minister Maldives; and the Hon Frank Lui, Premier of Niue.

5. The highlights of the Group's conclusions and recommendations were as follows:

Assisting the Sustainable Development of Small States in the Light of the Barbados Programme of Action

6. Ministers:

- noted the extent of environmental vulnerability of small states;
- recognised the usefulness of the Barbados Programme of Action as a framework for promoting the sustainable development of small island developing states;
- expressed concern about slow progress in the implementation of the Programme and suggested that national plans highlight areas where further action was needed, including identification of priorities for assistance and strategies for self-help;
- called on the Global Environment Facility to channel more resources to environmental projects of interest to small states;
- underscored the importance to small states of strengthening the provisions of the Framework Convention on Climate Change;
- noted the value of regional initiatives to ensure sustainable development and economic security and in that context acknowledged the Plan of Action adopted by the South Pacific Forum at its recent meeting in Madang for securing development beyond the year 2000;
- emphasised the need for particular attention to be given to human resource development in small states and in that regard recognised the role of distance education;
- expressed concern at the economic and social costs of natural and other environmental disasters for small states, and called for the enhancement of early warning systems and a comprehensive evaluation of assistance available for rehabilitation, including the availability and cost of insurance;
- recognised the need for more in-depth studies on ocean resources and the marine environment;

- called for an updating of the Report, *Vulnerability: Small States in the Global Society*, prepared by the Commonwealth Consultative Group in 1985, and for the early completion of the vulnerability index in order to assist international consideration of the special problems of small states, including their access to concessional resources from international financial institutions; and
- expressed concern at declining official resource flows for small states.

Commonwealth Small States and the International Trading System

7. Ministers:

- recognised the adverse effects on small states arising from the erosion of trade preferences and transitional costs of adjusting to the new international trade regime, and called for the implementation of measures which addressed those difficulties, including ways to assist the development of links between small states and the World Trade Organisation;
- also recognised that in order for small states to take advantage of trading opportunities created by the Uruguay Round Agreements, they needed to improve competitiveness, export market development (including through co-production), and diversification of their economies. In that connection they noted the call for the setting up of a special fund to facilitate diversification;
- noted also that adjustment of small economies to freer trade was a long-term process requiring considerable resources but that many small states were experiencing declining flows of official resources; in that regard, emphasised the need for greater assistance in support of national efforts;
- called for an early review of market access for ACP states for bananas and other major products into the EU after expiry of the Lomé IV Convention;
- noted the need for an examination of barriers to labour flows;
- also noted the value of regional or sub-regional import procurement programmes for certain products, such as pharmaceuticals, and encouraged their wider application; and

- requested the Commonwealth Secretariat to continue its work on assessing the implications of the Uruguay Round Agreements for small states and stressed the importance of focusing this work on policy analysis and technical assistance.

Security Concerns of Small States

8. Ministers:

- with the exception of Britain, urged Heads of Government to take account of the very strong opposition to nuclear testing voiced by many representatives at the Meeting, in particular, concerns about the potential risk to the fragile marine environment which could undermine efforts to achieve sustainable development; and expressed their deep disappointment that certain nuclear weapon states had not heeded the concerns of small states on this issue;
- expressed support for nuclear weapon free zones and welcomed the reaffirmation by Britain that it would sign the Protocols to the Rarotonga Treaty in 1996. Also affirmed the importance of an early conclusion of a Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty with a zero threshold;
- recognised the multi-dimensional nature of security and requested the Commonwealth Secretariat to keep this fully in view, including in updating the *Vulnerability Report* ;
- also recognised that the United Nations remained the primary organisation for guaranteeing the security of small states, including their independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity, and considered that regional organisations as well as the Commonwealth could play a useful supporting role to the UN;
- agreed that the concerns expressed by Belize regarding its security, sovereignty and territorial integrity be conveyed to the Heads of Government. They also noted the concerns expressed by the representative of Cyprus about the situation in that country;
- expressed concern at the danger posed to the security of small states by mercenary activity and by illicit arms traffic, and considered that these matters should be kept in view in addressing the security of small states;

- expressed continuing support for the initiative on the Protection and Security of Small States, initiated in the UN General Assembly in 1989 by the Government of the Maldives;
- emphasised the possible dangers of transboundary shipment of nuclear and hazardous waste through busy sea lanes surrounding small states, and welcomed the Statement on that matter issued by CARICOM Heads of Government in February 1995, and the Waigani Convention on Hazardous and Radioactive Wastes adopted by the South Pacific Forum in September 1995, as useful instruments for addressing this critical issue; and
- recognised the importance of the Commonwealth Secretariat's programme to strengthen the capacity of members to combat money laundering and called for continued assistance in that area based on decisions taken by Commonwealth Law Ministers and Commonwealth Finance Ministers.

Key Priorities of Interest to Small States and Future Directions for Commonwealth Secretariat Work

9. Ministers:

- welcomed the growing links between the Commonwealth Secretariat and regional organisations (such as CARICOM, the South Pacific Forum and the Indian Ocean Commission), and urged the development and implementation of co-operative and complementary programmes of assistance to small states;
- asked the Secretariat to continue to pay special attention to small states' needs in respect of consensus building, policy development, technical assistance, including advice on operational matters and on institution and capacity building;
- endorsed suggestions contained in the paper, "*Recent concerns of small states and Secretariat action to alleviate them*" (MGSS(95)1), as priority areas for Secretariat assistance to small states; and
- noted the difficulties faced by small states in participating fully at international meetings and conferences of importance to them, and asked the Secretariat to examine ways of dealing with that problem.

Membership and Role of the Ministerial Group on Small States and the Consultative Group on Small States

10. Ministers:

- agreed that the meetings served a valuable purpose and should continue to be held;
- also agreed that the current format was generally acceptable but that various options could be considered in the future, including by the Consultative Group; and
- recommended that the current membership of both the Ministerial Group and the Consultative Group on Small States should be expanded to include all small states, and endorsed the current open-ended approach of inviting Commonwealth governments and other relevant governments or organisations to meetings of both Groups.

11 November 1995