

The Commonwealth in the Global Community

The Commonwealth has a key role in building consensus on issues of global importance. In recognition of this, the Millbrook Action Programme outlined a greater role for the association in using its unique characteristics to build bridges across traditional international divides of opinion.

For the past three decades, consensus within the association has informed debate, policy formulation and action on matters of critical importance to the international community. Global and regional arrangements for the strengthening of peace and security, promoting sustainable development, tackling the debt crisis and protecting the interests of small states have all benefited from Commonwealth consensus and the ability of its members, singly or collectively, to promote the association's views in other international fora.



Concern for refugees ... Secretary-General Chief Emeka Anyaoku receives the report of the Intergovernmental Group on Refugees and Displaced Persons from Ambassador Michael E Sherifis, the group's chairman

At the UN and Other Organisations

The principal forum for the promotion of consensus on major world issues is the UN, where the Commonwealth has observer status at the General Assembly. Commonwealth countries have made important contributions across a range of subjects and the Secretariat has developed close working relations at every level with the UN Secretariat. In the past two years, the Commonwealth Secretary-General has participated in meetings convened by the UN Secretary-General to consider how international peace and security matters might be more comprehensively addressed through co-operation between the UN and regional and other international organisations. The second meeting in the series took place in February 1996.

PROMOTING POLICIES TO ATTRACT PRIVATE CAPITAL FLOWS

At their meeting in Bermuda in 1996, Commonwealth Finance Ministers agreed that the role of national and international policies in encouraging private capital flows for investment should be studied in greater depth by a small working group of senior Commonwealth finance ministry officials. As a result, a working group comprising senior finance officials of Australia, Britain, Botswana, Canada, Ghana, Guyana, India, Malaysia, Mauritius, Pakistan, South Africa, Uganda, Vanuatu and Zimbabwe was set up.

The group met in February and April 1997 and discussed the policies for enhancing, sustaining and coping with capital flows as well as the role of international policies, agreements and agencies, including that of the Commonwealth. The group's conclusions and recommendations will be reported to Commonwealth Finance Ministers who meet in Mauritius in September 1997.

Commonwealth Permanent Representatives to the UN met in February 1996 with the Commonwealth Secretary-General in New York and decided that they would hold regular meetings among themselves to discuss various Commonwealth decisions and initiatives and how these could be carried forward at the UN. The Commonwealth Secretariat has ensured that the Permanent Representatives are informed of these decisions, and the Secretary-General and his senior colleagues participate in the meetings when they are in New York. The Permanent Representative of New Zealand, as the 1995 CHOGM host country, currently chairs the meetings.

The Commonwealth also maintains close working relations and contacts with other regional and international organisations. For example, the Secretary-General participated in the 1996 and 1997 meetings of the Conference of Heads of Government of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) where he briefed Heads on current developments in the association and received feedback from them which will inform future Commonwealth activities.

To further strengthen its institutional, consultative and operational links with these organisations, the Secretariat has signed Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) with CARICOM (February 1996) and with Unicef (November 1996). MOUs have previously been exchanged with the *Agence de Coopération Culturelle et Technique*, the OAU and the South Pacific Forum Secretariat, among others. The Commonwealth Secretariat has used its relationships with such organisations to promote the interests of all Commonwealth members, especially on such issues as money laundering and assistance to small states.

Refugees

Since the 1995 CHOGM, the Commonwealth has sought to draw more international attention to the complex issue of the world's refugees and displaced persons. The Secretariat has established an Intergovernmental Group on Refugees and Displaced Persons (IGRDP) which has highlighted the special problems of refugee women and children who comprise a majority of refugees and displaced persons, and the particular challenge which this crisis poses to a number of Commonwealth countries, especially in Africa. The Secretary-General will present the IGRDP's report to the 1997 CHOGM.

National and International Economic Issues

The Commonwealth has also continued to play an important bridge-building role on economic issues. The conferences of its Finance Ministers, held just before the annual International Monetary Fund/World Bank meetings, are a key forum for arriving at a collective view or set of proposals on economic matters for promotion in international fora.

These Finance Ministers meetings are therefore often launching pads for new international and Commonwealth initiatives, including those on debt, private capital flows and combating money laundering. The Commonwealth Private Investment Initiative (see page 40) was launched at the 1995 meeting and in previous years, important proposals on resolving the multilateral debt problem have been put forward and later



*The consultation process at work ...
Commonwealth health ministers met in Cape
Town, South Africa, in 1995*

taken up at wider international levels. To help promote the collective Commonwealth view, since 1996, the Secretariat has arranged for press briefings by Commonwealth Finance Ministers at the venue of the Fund/Bank meetings.

Action on Debt

For many years, the Commonwealth has played a major role in the development of initiatives to reduce the debt burden facing heavily indebted poor countries (HIPCs). At their 1995 meeting, Commonwealth Finance Ministers asked the Secretariat to maintain the initiative on multilateral debt originally proposed by the British Chancellor of the Exchequer at the 1994 conference. The Secretariat circulated a paper on the multilateral debt problems of HIPCs to the IMF and World Bank Executive Boards, with the aim of contributing to their discussions on the issue in February/March 1996.

Once the proposed framework and timetable on multilateral debt relief became clear following the April 1996 IMF/World Bank Interim and Development Committee Meetings, the Secretary-General wrote to the Heads of Government of the Group of Seven (G7) prior to their summit in Lyon, France, in June 1996, urging them to give decisive leadership on the issue and strengthen the initiative in a number of ways.

When they met in 1996, Finance Ministers, while encouraged by the progress made in advancing proposals on the HIPC debt, recognised that these needed to be further strengthened if as many eligible countries as possible were to exit this category by the year 2000. They agreed it was important for the Commonwealth to continue to focus on debt issues and provide technical support to countries seeking debt relief.

An Action Programme on HIPCs was formally endorsed by the IMF/World Bank Interim and Development Committee Meetings in September 1996 and the World Bank established a HIPC Trust Fund, to which it has agreed to transfer US\$500 million of the net income from the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development as its initial contribution. Since then, the Secretariat has continued to work on two fronts: it has emphasised the need for strengthening the Action Programme and accelerating its implementation, and has helped countries build their capacity to carry out analysis of debt sustainability and the impact of debt on development (*see page 35*).

New Trade Challenges

Consensus-building on trade policy issues and assisting developing member countries in trade policy development continue to be an

SOVEREIGNTY AND SECURITY

Small states feature prominently in the Commonwealth's consensus-building activities. The association's solidarity and support continue to be vital for two of its small states – Cyprus and Belize. The Commonwealth continues to support the unity, independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Cyprus, invaded by Turkey in 1974 and since divided. It supports UN and other international efforts to find solutions and the Commonwealth Action Group on Cyprus stands ready to assist when required.

The Commonwealth continues to monitor the problem of Belize and its difficulties stemming from the territorial claim of Guatemala. The association has consistently reiterated its support for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Belize, and a Commonwealth Ministerial Committee on Belize also remains ready to meet when required.

The Secretariat's other assistance to small states is described in an earlier chapter (*see page 85*).

important part of the Secretariat's work in the new era of global trade liberalisation. Since the 1995 CHOGM, it has been conducting policy work in two main areas: facing the post-Uruguay Round challenges, and the post-Lomé IV Convention arrangements for the group of African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries.

The post-Uruguay Round agenda comprises a number of old and new issues having a bearing on the conduct of trade and trade-related policies. Trade and environment, regionalism, investment, competition policies and government procurement practices are some of the new issues proposed for multilateral rule-making in the WTO. The Secretariat prepared a policy-oriented report on the new issues to assist member governments at the first WTO Ministerial Conference in Singapore in December 1996, and is undertaking further studies identified at this conference focusing on key negotiating issues and country interests.



Strengthening links with other organisations ... the Secretariat signs a Memorandum of Understanding with the Caribbean Community in 1996

The form and nature of a successor arrangement to the Lomé IV Convention will be of considerable importance to the ACP group, which includes most of the small states and the least developed countries in the Commonwealth. It is especially critical for those who are highly dependent on special trading arrangements with the European Union for principal exports such as bananas and sugar. Studies by the Secretariat have analysed possible options for a successor arrangement capable of addressing the diverse trade and development interests of ACP countries. These studies provided a basis for discussion among ACP country representatives at a workshop in Brussels, Belgium, in May 1997 organised jointly by the Commonwealth and ACP Group Secretariats as a first step to forming consensus.