

Commonwealth faces pressure to reform
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Commonwealth leaders were warned today that their summit in Australia would be seen as a failure if they did not embrace bold reforms on human rights and other contentious issues.

As the leaders from the bloc of 54 mainly former British colonies met to thrash out their response to a series of proposals they had commissioned, the architects of the reform package expressed concern about a potential whitewash.

Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, the former Malaysian prime minister who chaired the Eminent Persons Group that drafted the reforms for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), said there were high hopes key proposals would be accepted.

"If this CHOGM does not deliver such reforms, it is our duty to sound the caution to you that this CHOGM will be remembered not as the triumph it should be, but as a failure," Abdullah said in a statement today.

The Eminent Persons Group was created after the last CHOGM summit two years ago to deal with criticism that the bloc was slipping into irrelevancy, largely due to its failure to uphold democracy and human rights among member nations.

It produced 106 recommendations, among them the call for the creation of a commissioner for democracy and human rights, with another urging a charter outlining the values upheld by all members.

However, while rich countries such as Australia, Britain and Canada favour a stronger focus on human rights and other contentious issues, many developing nations resent outside influence.

Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard was leading "retreat" talks in Perth's King's Park today to discuss the recommendations, as well as other issues such as food security, sustainable development and climate change.

Abdullah and other members of the Eminent Persons Group held a press conference to express their concerns that the three-day summit was in danger of wrapping up tomorrow with their report being largely ignored.

"We are yet to see (from the leaders) a very serious fight for the life and soul of the Commonwealth, on the basis of our report," group member Emmanuel Akwetey said.

"There will be a sense of collective failure in terms of leadership (if the recommendations are not adopted)."

Queen Elizabeth II told the opening of the summit that the organisation needed to adapt to remain "fresh and fit for tomorrow".

"I wish heads of government well in agreeing further reforms that respond boldly to the aspirations of today and that keep the Commonwealth fresh and fit for tomorrow," said the monarch, who departed for London today.

Gillard waters down expectations

Gillard appeared to water down expectations today, saying any reforms, such as a rights and democracy watchdog, could only be adopted if there was consensus among all members.

“But I’d like to remind people that progress has already been made during the course of discussions,” she added, citing a move to give Commonwealth foreign ministers more powers to deal with human rights breaches.

This step, announced yesterday, would allow the bloc to engage earlier with governments in danger of violating human rights and the rule of law.

However the Eminent Persons Group advisers said this step alone would not go far enough.

They also said that leaders had so far appeared to ignore almost all the other recommendations, including one calling for an end to homophobic laws in many member nations that were contributing to the spread of HIV/AIDS.

Other recommendations focused on women’s rights and helping small island nations deal with climate change.

The summit was being held amid heavy security with the centre of Perth in virtual lockdown to deter potential terrorist threats and limit any protests by those wanting to emulate the global ‘Occupy’ movement.

Malaysia’s supporters of polls reform group Bersih 2.0 held a protest yesterday in support of free and clean elections (photos).

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