



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



THE SENATE

PROOF

ADJOURNMENT

**Fifth Asia-Pacific Conference on
Reproductive and Sexual Health and Rights**

SPEECH

Thursday, 19 November 2009

BY AUTHORITY OF THE SENATE

SPEECH

Date Thursday, 19 November 2009
Page 110
Questioner
Speaker Furner, Sen Mark

Source Senate
Proof Yes
Responder
Question No.

Senator FURNER (Queensland) (7.31 pm)—I rise to talk about a recent event: as a member of the Parliamentary Group on Population and Development, I was privileged to be present at the Fifth Asia-Pacific Conference on Reproductive and Sexual Health and Rights recently. Firstly, I acknowledge the People's Republic of China for its professionalism and hospitality displayed over the three days. The conference was organised under the sponsorship of, and in collaboration with, the China Family Planning Association, along with many other organisations from around the globe. The People's Republic of China is to be congratulated for the delivery and commitment in making this conference such a success. Additionally, I wish to acknowledge the excellent support provided by the secretariat of the Parliamentary Group on Population and Development, Jane Singleton, Alice and Rose.

From the outset of accepting the invitation to attend, I had not appreciated the importance of the work and commitment in this area. There are copious statistics out there on a variety of human rights issues which we need to address around the globe. However, the most compelling which are now etched in my memory are that by the time I deliver this 10-minute adjournment speech, there will be 10 women in the world who die from maternal mortality; that in the African continent, which represents 15 per cent of the world's population, nearly half of the mothers die during pregnancy; and that there are more than five million HIV cases in Asia and the Pacific, and over half of these are aged under 24.

The member for Lyne, Rob Oakeshott, was the other parliamentarian participating in the conference. On the second day he provided a report on his commitment in establishing a male parliamentary group on prevention of violence against women and girls in the region. On the third day of the conference I was privileged to be provided with the opportunity to present my opinion of the status of the plenary session promoting and enhancing partnership in SRHR. I delivered a short address on the summary of contemporary issues which I found were key areas from the conference and my own personal understanding of key areas where the Australian government is delivering in the area.

Interestingly enough, there was an underlying focus on climate change. In fact, I think that most of the

speakers at the conference reflected on that and its effect on population and agriculture across the globe. Just yesterday I was at the launch of a report which is part of the *State of the world 2009* report by UNFPA, entitled *Facing a changing world: women, population and climate*. I know it is not permissible to show parts of the publication, but I will just refer to a couple of entries:

We have read the science. Global warming is real, and we are a prime cause ... We must set an agenda—create a roadmap to the future, coupled with a timeline that produces a deal by 2009.

Later on in the publication there is a picture of an ex-glacier in Bolivia that is now just a lake. It indicates that the glaciers are melting rapidly, jeopardising water supplies to rural and urban communities in that country.

Going back to the conference, although youth activities have always been a key theme area of the Asia-Pacific Conference on Reproductive and Sexual Health and Rights, this conference saw it as being mainstream. It was recognised that youth in the region need to play an increasingly active role in policies and programs that are geared towards fulfilment of their reproductive health and rights. The Fifth APCRSRHR, for the first time, established a youth committee to organise the youth programs at the conference. With joint efforts by the conference steering and organising committees, the youth committee arranged a series of activities and programs that aimed to connect young leaders across the region to work together throughout the conference.

The youth day seminars and workshops, along with parallel panel meetings and discussions, created a distinct platform to facilitate experience, learning and sharing among young people themselves and also established a space for constructing genuine youth and adult partnerships. The youth program involved presenting a united voice to address sexual and reproductive health challenges and opportunities through the conference and throughout the region, making a declaration.

In ensuring participation of youth in the conference, scholarships were offered to around 150 young people, including 70 young people from China and 80 young people from other countries. The 150 young people

were composed of 15 speakers and 135 ordinary youth participants. I was impressed and convinced by the enthusiasm and commitment these young people delivered at the conference.

Given the situation of youth in the region, it was only proper that they had a relevant place at the conference. The conference heard of young people in the Asia-Pacific region being in jeopardy, as many of them have inadequate preparation for sexual lives. Few young people receive adequate preparation for their sexual lives, leaving them potentially vulnerable to coercion, abuse and exploitation, unintended pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. One of the objectives of the conference was to ensure that all Asians can access reproductive health services, despite falling short of global agreement. That is an essential to meeting other development goals.

At the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, outcomes called for universal access to reproductive health by 2015. Two years ago the United Nations linked this objective to the Millennium Development Goal of a three-quarter reduction in maternal deaths by the same year. However, the conference heard that there has been a lacklustre reaction by governments, donors and development institutions in funding the Cairo action plan, according to the Beijing call for action drafted by the conference organisers. The call urges civil society, parliamentarians, governments, donors and young people to rapidly fulfil the unfinished agenda of the ICPD.

Dr Gill Greer, Director-General of the International Planned Parenthood Federation, indicated the global recession is threatening support for NGOs working for reproductive and sexual health and rights. She stressed that fundraising necessary to combat climate change must not reduce resources needed for development. Dr Zhao Baige, Vice Minister of China's National Population and Family Planning Commission, NPFPC, noted her country's dramatic reductions in fertility and maternal deaths in the past three decades, and said that the national family planning program had moved from an administrative approach to one of informed choice.

Turning to our closest backyard, the Pacific, we reflect on the fact that some countries in the region have made good progress and have even achieved some MDG targets, although the same cannot be said of the region as a whole. Around 2.7 million people are living in poverty, not having the income to satisfy their basic human needs. About 700,000 children in the region do not finish primary school and 40 out of every 1,000 children born alive die before the age of five. The rate of infection of HIV-AIDS is growing by more than 40 per cent a year. Pacific island nations are facing lower prices and reduced demand for commodity exports,

pressure on tourism, falls in remittance flows, falls in the value of offshore national trust funds and in some cases difficulties accessing finance. At the family level, lower cash incomes can translate into less money for food, children being withdrawn from school and worsening health outcomes.

Despite these concerns, there are young Pacific islanders receiving qualifications in trades through the Australia-funded Australia-Pacific Technical College. The Australian government is supporting the Pacific in two locations. One is that we fund young students from Kiribati to come to Brisbane to train as nurses. The program started a couple of years ago and has resulted in the first group receiving their nursing diplomas. They are now starting Bachelor of Nursing courses at Griffith University in Brisbane. When these nurses finish they will have transferable qualifications that will help them gain work just about anywhere. The program will enable them to send remittances home as well as provide more trained nurses for Kiribati. The other scheme is a pilot where people from the Pacific come to Australia to do seasonal work in the horticulture sector. They will gain valuable skills in horticulture and return some of the money they make back home.

Despite the Australian government managing the economy with a safe pair of hands, our neighbours in the Pacific will still have millions and millions of people who have not received a decent education, health care, or clean water and sanitation services. There will still be gender imbalances. There will still be an underlying food crisis. Consequently, we need to increase our effort, our effectiveness and our efficiency to contribute to securing the future of the Pacific.

Additionally, I spent two days attending the first annual review meeting of SPRINT. As part of the Australian government's commitment to the Millennium Development Goals, in February 2008 the Parliamentary Secretary for International Development Assistance, Hon. Bob McMullan, launched the AusAID funded \$3 million SPRINT program—Sexual and Reproductive Health Program in Crisis and Post-Crisis Situations in East Asia, South-East Asia, and the Pacific. In the past decade and in this year alone there has been a significant increase in the number of crises in the Asia-Pacific region, through natural disasters, climatic variation, political instability or civil unrest. There is no doubt, based on scientific views and comments made by presenters at both conferences, that climate change will make a significant impact on the region's population.

In summary, one of the impressive areas of SPRINT was an initiative that came about as a result of Cyclone Nargis, which hit Myanmar and caused 140,000 deaths. (*Extension of time granted*) Two NGOs had

already completed a training of trainers into crisis response. These trained NGOs initiated their skills in the Minimum Initial Service Package delivery. A year after the disaster a review was conducted with the key finding being that without the SPRINT initiative the reproductive health needs of those vulnerable people would have been forgotten. The Rudd government considers it essential that civil society organisations be involved in the response to humanitarian crises and the promotion of sustainable development because of their capacity to engage quickly and promote community ownership of recovery efforts. The partnership with the International Planned Parenthood Federation and their partners from the University of New South Wales and the Australian Reproductive Health Alliance has made this excellent program happen.

In summary, both conferences provided an excellent opportunity to obtain an appreciation of the important work governments and NGOs are performing. Notwithstanding that, we all need to aim higher to provide the humanitarian aid to our neighbours and those less fortunate on this planet. By improving the lives of our neighbours we will add to the growth and stability in our region.