**UN expert denounces Australia plan to drug-test benefit claimants as “cheap shot” at most vulnerable**

GENEVA (17 October 2017) – Australian proposals to introduce mandatory drug-testing for unemployment benefit recipients are counter-productive, stigmatizing and a misguided attack on the poorest members of society, a UN human rights expert has said.

The trial measure, due to be voted in the Senate tomorrow, would cut all social assistance from anyone refusing the test, and introduce Government income management for anyone testing positive. Around 5,000 recipients of Newstart and Youth Allowance benefits would be affected.

“The Australian Government is conflating social protection and drug enforcement policies in a way that is counter-productive, unless the main goal is to stigmatize social security recipients,” said the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston.

“If the real goal is to reduce the use of illegal drugs, why start with the poorest members of society?” asked Mr. Alston. “Will there also be a policy designed to drug test and crack down on the well-to-do who spend far more on drugs, and receive all sorts of tax deductions, social security payments and other government benefits? Or is it only the poorest whose drug use the government feels it should punish through social security-based measures?”

The Special Rapporteur continued: “If the main goal is cost-cutting, then the proposals are simply bad maths. Based on experience overseas, only a small percentage of beneficiaries are likely to test positive, but testing will cost between $500 and $900 per individual.

“Anyone whose benefits are cancelled will only become an even bigger drain on public resources in other ways.

“The Government should be focusing all its efforts and public spending on assisting those without employment to get back to decent work. Instead it is misallocating scarce resources with this misguided plan.

“By implying that all welfare recipients are potential criminals, the Government is throwing away significant sums of taxpayer money on testing and controlling the very few who actually have a drug problem,” he added.

The Special Rapporteur stressed that drug dependency was a public health issue and had to be treated accordingly.

“The Government is ignoring decades of evidence if it thinks that a punitive approach will force an individual out of drug use. Serious concern about drug dependency requires a targeted and nuanced policy, not a cheap assault on the most vulnerable,” the Special Rapporteur said.

The drug-testing proposal is part of the Welfare Reform Bill due to be considered tomorrow by the Australian Senate. It is one of a series of new or proposed laws designed to reduce benefits and add new conditions for receiving them, which Mr. Alston said had undermined social protection, imposed onerous conditions on claimants, and cast them as often criminal, lazy or fraudulent.

In May, the Social Services Legislation Amendment Act 2017 froze the amount of income that social security recipients could earn without deductions being made, extended the waiting period before a claim could be lodged, and froze family tax benefits.

These changes, Mr. Alston said, “severely affect the human right to social security and to an adequate standard of living for a large group of single parents, predominantly single mothers living in or near poverty, adding a shocking gender discrimination dimension to all of this”.

“As a new member of the UN Human Rights Council, I urge Australia to live up to its pledges to ensure respect, dignity and the protection of the human rights of all people and to work with the international human rights mechanisms,” the Special Rapporteur said.

ENDS

***Mr. Philip Alston*** *(Australia) took up his functions as the* [*Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights*](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Poverty/Pages/SRExtremePovertyIndex.aspx) *in June 2014. As a Special Rapporteur, he is part of what is known as the* [*Special Procedures*](https://www.ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/SP/Pages/Welcomepage.aspx) *of the Human Rights Council. Special Procedures, the largest body of independent experts in the UN Human Rights system, is the general name of the Council’s independent fact-finding and monitoring mechanisms that address either specific country situations or thematic issues in all parts of the world. Special Procedures’ experts work on a voluntary basis; they are not UN staff and do not receive a salary for their work. They are independent from any government or organization and serve in their individual capacity.*

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