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MESSAGE FROM THE PRIME MINISTER, MR. HON. R.J.L. HAWKE, TO THE
ANNUAL MEETING OF THE PARLIAMENTARY GROUP OF AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

It is a matter of great regret to me that I am unable to be present at the Annual Meeting of the Parliamentary Group of Amnesty International tonight. The work of the group is of utmost importance in reinforcing Amnesty International's efforts to strengthen the expression of Australians' public concern on human rights issues as a whole, and especially for the continued detention of thousands of prisoners of conscience held in prisons throughout the world.

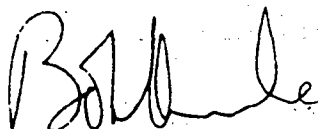
The Government attaches a strong priority to human rights issues. We cooperate closely with Amnesty International and greatly appreciate its information-gathering work. We naturally wish that any approaches on human rights cases are as effective as possible, and I have to say that there are situations where the efforts of non-government organisations can be more effective than the efforts of governments.

The Government has pursued a number of cases of political prisoners and has supported relevant United Nations initiatives on human rights. We have expressed concern about human rights violations to a variety of governments of different ideological persuasions and in different areas of the world, whose relations with Australia are of differing degrees of closeness. We have had a number of successes, the most recent of which was the release of 3 detainees in South Korea following my visit.

While not a matter of direct concern to Amnesty International under its terms of reference, I would like to raise a related matter which is also of serious concern to the Government and to the Australian community as a whole. I refer to the forced and tragic separation of families as a result of the actions of Government authorities which refuse to expedite or allow exit arrangements for the families of their nationals who have already left their countries of origin and sought asylum, refugee status, residence or citizenship in Australia. There is, for example, a fairly constant caseload of over 300 family units from Eastern Europe alone who seek to be reunited in Australia. The Government does all it can to keep these cases before the authorities concerned, and in whose hands the resolution of this problem ultimately rests. I would like to take this opportunity to enlist your concern and to call for these authorities to show compassion for these families and to allow them to be reunited in Australia.

Last October I participated in a ceremony to light a candle of hope to commemorate Prisoner of Conscience Week. These symbolic occasions serve the useful purpose of drawing international attention to the importance of observing human rights, whether in the field of political freedoms, racism, sexism or legal protection. We must all maintain our vigilance on these issues through the entire year.

I wish the Parliamentary Group of Amnesty International well in its deliberations.



R.J.L. Hawke

7 MARCH 1984