VIRTUAL COLOMBO PLAN ANNOUNCED

The Australian Government and the World Bank have announced a $1.5 billion partnership to combat global poverty with a state-of-the-art distance education initiative. The Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, and the President of the World Bank, James D. Wolfensohn, unveiled the new plan to share Australian expertise with developing countries using information and communication technologies (ICTs) at a meeting in Sydney.

Australia has pledged $200 million to what will be known as the Virtual Colombo Plan, aimed at creating opportunities to improve education and access to knowledge across the developing world on everything from primary school teacher training to advanced courses for policymakers.

‘As a regional leader Australia is in a unique position to help close the digital divide and offer affordable distance education,’ Mr Downer said.

The Virtual Colombo Plan builds on the concepts of the original Colombo Plan that celebrates its 50th anniversary this year. The Colombo Plan is the world’s oldest program of cooperation between nations focused on economic and social development. Australia was one of the seven founding members of the initiative that focused on facilitating technical assistance for developing countries.

The Virtual Colombo Plan will provide a package of initiatives that addresses basic and higher education, knowledge infrastructure, knowledge dissemination (Australian research and knowledge extended globally) and new learning opportunities for policy makers.

HUMAN RIGHTS TRAINING IN BURMA

The Australian Government is conducting a further four introductory training workshops titled ‘Human Rights and Responsibilities’ in Burma. The workshops are being held in September/October in Rangoon, and for the first time in Mandalay, the second largest city in Burma. The workshops, which began in July, will raise awareness of international human rights standards and relevant United Nations conventions.

These four-day workshops are being conducted by Monash University with participants drawn mainly from middle level positions in the ministries of Education, Health, Labour and Foreign Affairs. Representatives of Burmese civil society organisations have been invited to participate in the workshops for the first time.

AUSTRALIA SUPPORTS FREE AND FAIR CAMBODIA ELECTIONS

Mr Downer has welcomed the announcement by the Cambodian Government that Commune elections will be held on 3 February 2002, for the first time in 30 years.

Mr Downer said the elections would serve as an important milestone in the process of democratisation in Cambodia and deserved the full support of the Australian Government and the broader international community. During the elections, representatives will be chosen for 1,621 communes across Cambodia, providing democratic representation at a local level.

The Australian Government will provide $600,000 in support of the election process. The Australian Government’s overseas aid program contribution will be distributed through the United Nations Development Program.
AUSTRALIAN AID TO HELP VICTIMS OF VIOLENCE IN MALUKU, INDONESIA

Australia is to help people affected by the continuing unrest in Maluku, Indonesia. An estimated 4,000 people have died during the conflict and over 500,000 people have been displaced. The $2.9 million package of activities includes the provision of health care and ensuring food security through the delivery of Australian rice. The Australian Government bought 1,000 tonnes of rice from rice growers in New South Wales to help meet the immediate food needs of displaced people. Worth a total of $940,000, including freight and distribution costs, the consignment is being distributed by the World Food Programme and Action Contre La Faim (ACF) (Action Against Hunger). This contribution provided 2.5 million daily rations — enough to feed up to 45,000 people for two months.

Supplementary food items, including cooking oil and beans for those who were still displaced, were provided in addition to $1 million to ACF for livelihood support for those who were able to return to their homes. ACF’s activities have included the distribution of food, seeds, tools and fishing equipment to vulnerable groups, support for income-generating projects, and water and sanitation infrastructure rehabilitation.

OPPORTUNITIES IN COMMONWEALTH CAPACITY BUILDING PROGRAMS

AusAID funds a number of capacity building programs in countries throughout the Commonwealth. These programs generally involve the provision of technical assistance to support national departments and agencies to achieve their development objectives.

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Senator Kay Patterson, Parliamentary Secretary for the Minister for Foreign Affairs, chats with Professor Herb Feith, the ‘grandfather’ of volunteering in Australia at the opening of a special exhibition in Melbourne of photographs depicting the experiences of Australian volunteers overseas and in outback communities. Professor Feith, from Monash University, was Australia’s first international volunteer under the Volunteer Graduate Scheme, serving initially as an interpreter in Indonesia in 1951. The exhibition of 48 photographs was staged in June as part of this year’s International Year of Volunteers. More than 900 Australians have been working as volunteers in overseas aid projects during the past year. The Australian Government has pledged $60 million for volunteer activities over the next three years. During this financial year, the Government has committed $18.6 million to support Australian overseas volunteer organisations including Australian Volunteers International and AESOP Business Volunteers. Photo: Mathias Heng