



COMMUNITY RELATIONS COMMISSION
For a multicultural NSW

COMMUNITY HARMONY REFERENCE GROUP

REPORT 2003

Prepared by:
Community Relations Commission For a multicultural NSW

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NEW SOUTH WALES GOVERNMENT

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CONTENTS

Introduction	5
1.1 Executive Summary	5
1.2 Terms of Reference	6
1.3 Operational Guidelines	6
Establishment/Implementation	7
2.1 Background	7
2.2 Structure and guidelines	7
Initiatives/Outcomes	8
3.1 Communication mechanisms	8
3.1.1 Hotline and e-mail help	8
3.1.2 Press releases and advertising	
3.1.3 CRC website	8
3.2 Partnerships	9
3.3 Access to information	9
3.4 Guest Speakers	10
3.5 Media	10
3.5.1 Media monitoring	10
3.5.2 Community Media Review	10
3.5.3 Media training	10
3.5.4 Media breakfast	10
3.6 Iraqi community meeting	10
3.7 Working Groups	11
3.7.1 Education Working Group	11
3.7.2 Public Discourse Working Group	11
3.7.3 Arabic and Islamic Working Group	12
3.8 Community Relations Crisis Management Plan	12
3.9 Funding	13
3.10 Assistance	13
Outstanding issues	14
4.1 Reporting of incidents	14
4.2 Youth strategy	14
4.3 Anti-Racism Contact Officer	14
Evaluation	15
5.1 Review and evaluation	15
5.2 Evaluation seminar	15
5.3 Summary of evaluation	15

Future directions	17
Appendices	18
Appendix A	–
Premier’s Memorandum	18
Appendix B	–
Press releases	19
Appendix C	–
‘How to respond to threats that may arise’ pamphlets	32
Appendix D	–
Australian Iraqi Community Council	46
Appendix E	–
Community Relations Crisis Management Plan letters from CEOs	47
Appendix F	–
Evaluation report	52
Appendix G	–
Community Harmony Reference Group Participants	63
Appendix H	–
Community Harmony Reference Group meeting dates	65
Appendix I	–
Cost and Impact	66

1. introduction

1.1 Executive Summary

In October 2002 the Community Relations Commission For a multicultural NSW (CRC) initiated action to ensure a coordinated rapid response to local community relations issues which may have arisen in the wake of the Bali bombings and the then possible conflict with Iraq.

At the request of the Premier (Appendix A), the CRC put in place processes and structures refined by the expertise and experience it has developed in managing the impact of significant events on the communities of NSW since, and including, the Gulf War.

A partnership approach was adopted with relevant government agencies and the leaders of those communities that the CRC considered might be affected. The Commission decided to establish a Community Harmony Reference Group with representatives from key Government agencies and communities. The Community Harmony Reference Group met for the first time on October 21 2002. It was chaired by Mr Stepan Kerkyasharian, and included representatives from NSW Police, DET, DoCS and the NSW Anti-Discrimination Board and from Sydney's Islamic, Arabic-speaking, Jewish, Iraqi, Indonesian, Turkish and Sikh communities. In establishing the Reference Group the CRC brought together communities, and factions within communities, who may not ordinarily have worked together.

A Steering Committee and three Working Groups were established to focus on specific areas – Education, Arabic and Islamic community issues, and Public Discourse.

Through the process and structures developed and implemented, information was disseminated, action debated and taken, methods examined to promote community harmony, resources created, government activity focused in a planned and coordinated manner and open and effective communication between stakeholders was established. Government agencies sought advice from communities, communities shared information, and government agencies were held accountable for their response to and handling of incidents prior to, throughout and subsequent to the war in Iraq.

The legacy of the Community Harmony Reference Group is sustainable outcomes. The Community Relations Crisis Management Plan (CRCM Plan) was developed within five months and is being incorporated as a subsection of the NSW DISPLAN (Disaster Management Plan), new policies exist to deal with incidents in NSW schools, other initiatives such as a Hotline and e-mail helpline are permanent features in the operation of the CRC, and relationships with significant people have been forged across communities and between government and communities.

The success of this partnership between government and communities has involved community development processes coupled with change management practices that have created a unique and effective model for the management of relationships between communities and is an example of the CRC fulfilling its legislative obligations and promoting community harmony.

1.2 Terms of Reference

1. To ensure a coordinated, rapid response to local community relations issues arising from the terrorist attack in Bali and the possible Australian involvement in a conflict with Iraq.
2. To provide a high level communication channel between government and those parts of the community likely to be affected.
3. To assist government agency activities to maintain community harmony, prevent harassment and violence and assist victims.
4. To engage and assist the media in its treatment of the issues in an informed and balanced way.
5. To consider actions recommended by communities and government agencies to promote local community harmony.

1.3 Operational Guidelines

1. The Community Relations Commission For a multicultural NSW will chair and convene the Community Harmony Reference Group.
2. The Community Harmony Reference Group will meet bimonthly for a period of up to 12 months.
3. A Steering Committee will be established comprising no more than 15 members. Representatives will include senior government officials and nominated community members. Other working groups may be established as required.
4. The Steering Committee will meet fortnightly or as required.
5. The CRC will provide a secretariat for the Community Harmony Reference Group and its Steering Committee.
6. The Chairperson of the CRC will be the official spokesperson for the Community Harmony Reference Group and the Steering Committee.
7. The CRC will report to the Premier on the activities of the Community Harmony Reference Group by no later than November 2003.

2. establishment/implementation

2.1 Background:

In October 2002, the Premier directed the Community Relations Commission For a multicultural NSW to establish the Community Harmony Reference Group to deal with community unease following the terrorist attacks in Bali and to ensure a coordinated rapid response to any local community relations issues which may have arisen in the wake international events. A Hotline (1800 80 41 41) was immediately established to allow for the reporting of incidents of abuse, insult or discrimination.

2.2 Structure and guidelines:

The Community Harmony Reference Group met on five occasions throughout the lead up, outbreak and consequences of the conflict in Iraq.

A partnership approach was adopted with relevant government agencies and the leaders of those communities which the CRC considered might be affected. Participants in the Reference Group process were those identified by the Commission as being key leaders from communities that were perceived to be under threat due to escalating international tensions. Members of the Reference Group indicated a high level of interest and signalled their commitment to the process by nominating themselves for the steering committee and working groups.

The first meeting of the Reference Group took place on 21 October 2002. At this meeting the Terms of Reference and Operational Guidelines were formulated and adopted.

Composition of Reference Group

Members of the Indonesian, Turkish, Arabic-speaking, Iraqi, Muslim, Jewish, and Sikh communities along with senior representatives from the NSW Police, Anti-Discrimination Board and the NSW Departments of Education and Training and Community Services attended the meetings.

Steering Committee

A Steering Committee was initially formed to establish the working groups. Once the Working Groups had established their own identity and there was no longer an identified need for the Steering Committee, it was subsequently abolished.

Working groups

After the project's establishment, three working groups were formed to address issues of community concern and to implement projects that assisted communities during times of community relations crises. The working groups focused on issues such as those pertaining to the Arabic and Islamic communities, education and public discourse.

3. initiatives/outcomes

3.1 Communication mechanisms

3.1.1 *Hotline and e-mail help*

Throughout the lead up to and outbreak of hostilities in Iraq, community members had the capacity to report incidents of abuse, insult or discrimination to the Commission via the following mechanisms:

- **Hotline (1800 80 41 41)** – this was monitored by Commission staff during business hours, and by bilingual (English/Arabic) counsellors between 5.00 pm and 9.00pm, Monday to Friday. All calls not answered within 15 seconds were diverted to a message bank*.
- **Language specific message bank** – following the escalation of hostilities in Iraq, the Commission established three additional hotlines (Arabic, Turkish and Indonesian) to facilitate individual reporting incidents of abuse, insult or discrimination.
- **E-mail** – an e-mail address (help@crc.nsw.gov.au) was also established to enable the recording of complaints.

It should be noted that the Commission has the ability to increase the capacity of the telephone lines if warranted by any escalation in tensions, as well as the capacity to hire extra bilingual counsellors to staff the phones on a 24 hour basis if needed.

There was a marked decrease in calls once hostilities in Iraq abated. This led to the decommissioning of the language specific hotlines on 19 May 2003. The 1800 80 41 41 hotline and help@crc.nsw.gov.au are both monitored by Commission staff on a daily basis and remain as permanent features at the Commission.

Strategies to implement multilingual communication mechanisms are now firmly in place at the Commission due to this process.

3.1.2 *Press Releases and advertising*

Throughout the Reference Group process, the Commission maintained strong communication with both mainstream and ethnic media outlets to ensure that both the relevant communities and the broader community were kept aware of the initiatives. (Appendix B)

At the outbreak of hostilities in Iraq, the Commission advertised its e-mail facility and hotlines in the Sydney Morning Herald and Daily Telegraph to ensure a wide reach.

3.1.3 *CRC Website*

In addition the Commission created a section on its website providing information on the initiatives undertaken by the Community Harmony Reference Group. This is found at www.crc.nsw.gov.au

* In addition, following discussions involving the NSW Minister for Health, the Commission's Chair person and representatives from the Chinese media, it was agreed that the hotline could be used by the Chinese community to report incidents of harassment and discrimination resulting from a perception that people from China could be carriers of the SARS virus.

3.2 Partnerships

The Commission has initiated numerous partnerships with government agencies in the process of fulfilling the terms of reference for the project.

At the request of Imams who attended a meeting with the Commission on 17 October 2002, the Commission translated and printed a fact sheet on dealing with threatening telephone calls and bomb threats in Arabic, Indonesian, Turkish and Urdu in conjunction with NSW Police. Since that time a further request was made that the pamphlets be translated into Croatian and Serbian. Pamphlets have been sent to various Mosques and community organisations and were made available for dissemination at the Reference Group. (Appendix C)

Meetings of the Working Groups were open and attracted broader participation, including the involvement of young people and were particularly important in disseminating information to communities and obtaining information and direction.

Links with the Association of Independent Schools and the Catholic Education Commission were developed to monitor occurrences in those environments and permission was obtained to disseminate information through those structures.

The Local Government and Shires Association endorsed the Community Relations Crisis Management Plan and gave its agreement for the resources of local government to be included within it.

3.3 Access to information

Many communities communicated that they felt disempowered due to lack of access to information. The Commission therefore provided the Reference Group and its associated working groups with information on the Australian Broadcasting Association's Codes of Practice, the amendments to the Australian Security Intelligence Organisations Legislation Amendment (Terrorism) Bill 2002, Terrorism (Police Powers) Bill 2002, the National Security Campaign and complaint procedures in schools and a variety of additional information at the request of the Reference Group.

Information was also provided regarding the Commonwealth's *Terrorism Insurance Act 2003*. As a result of representations from the community regarding the insurance for places of religious significance, the Premier wrote to the Prime Minister and NSW raised the issue at SCIMA (Standing Committee on Immigration and Multicultural Affairs) in November 2002 and again at MCIMA (Ministerial Council on Immigration and Multicultural Affairs) in June 2003. Since that time the Federal Government introduced legislation to implement a scheme for replacement terrorism insurance. This legislation covers places of worship and religious significance that have commercial insurance cover.

The CRC Regional Coordinators and Regional Advisory Councils participated by disseminating information on the process, providing local support and informing the Reference Group of issues, activities and incidents in rural and regional NSW.

The CRC's Arabic Youth Liaison Teams were kept aware of developments and engaged young people on the street in the course of their normal operation.

3.4 Guest speakers

Guest speakers who addressed the Reference Group, Steering Committee and working groups included Dr Gerard Henderson, Executive Director of The Sydney Institute and Sydney Morning Herald columnist, Ms Jan Zwar, author, and Ms Jenny McDonald, NSW Office for Children and Young People, and Mr James Fox, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Mr Brendan Stewart, Chairman of the Council of Australian-Arab Relations was invited to speak at a Reference Group meeting. Representatives from government agencies have addressed various working groups on issues of concern.

3.5 Media

3.5.1 *Media monitoring*

The Reference Group was given access to the Commission's media monitoring library. The Commission has monitored and reported to the Reference Group on media trends in the lead up to, outbreak and consequences of a conflict with Iraq.

3.5.2 *Community Media Review*

Furthermore, public affairs officers and media officers from government agencies involved in the formulation of CRCM Plan were given access to the Commission's Community Media Review throughout the duration of the hostilities in Iraq. To ensure a consistent NSW Government message, participating agencies agreed to share information through the automatic exchange of media releases.

3.5.3 *Media training*

Community leaders repeatedly expressed the importance of training sessions on how to effectively deal with the media. The Anti-Discrimination Board provided a one-day training session entitled "We Interrupt this Program" that was offered to Reference Group participants. Community organisations, such as the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils also organised media training sessions.

3.5.4 *Media breakfast*

The Reference Group requested that the Commission host a breakfast, the purpose of which was to examine the issues of balanced and fair reporting by the media and the responsibility of communities in dealing with tensions between communities as a result of international crises. The Commission proposed to invite senior management from print, radio and television outlets and key community leaders. The Commission invited two prominent Australian figures to give the keynote address but was turned down on both occasions.

3.6 Iraqi community meeting

In response to a request by Iraqi community representatives, the Commission held meetings with various Iraqi community organisations to discuss issues of concern. The key issues included:

- Peaceful or immediate methods by which to depose Saddam Hussein
- Saddam Hussein's threat to use chemical warfare against Kurdish people in Iraq

- Concern was expressed about the possibility of a Turkish peace-keeping force in Iraq in view of the turbulent history between Turkish and Kurdish people
- Lack of a representative organisation for the Iraqi community in NSW (Appendix D).

The Commission subsequently assisted the community to establish the Australian Iraqi Community Council. This is in the process of becoming an incorporated association.

3.7 Working groups – Actions and Progress

The working groups committed to and undertook the following actions:

3.7.1 Education working group

Purpose: To promote and encourage community harmony and cross-cultural understanding in school, post-school and community education

The objectives of the education working group included examining ways in which more cross-cultural education and community harmony can be incorporated into the curriculum of both public and private schools, creating further opportunities for cross-cultural dialogue to occur in schools and building on existing initiatives to promote community harmony and cross-cultural understanding

The education working group met on six occasions. During this time, the Department of Education and Training produced a document outlining multicultural initiatives in the education system. The ongoing initiative that role models from different communities go to talk to students in schools across NSW was recognised, and a senior education officer was invited to talk to the working group on issues pertaining to bullying and harassment in schools. Representatives from the Association of Independent Schools and the Catholic Education Commission were invited to join the working group and took part in the process. Commission staff developed strategies to promote and encourage community harmony and cross-cultural understanding and information about the Board of Studies and their curriculum development consultation process was provided to the group. The CRC website was linked to Racism. No Way! and the Commission approached JJJ to seek partnership to broadcast youth forums. The Commission included in briefings the appropriate greeting at religious or cultural events and Ms Jenny McDonald, Office of Children and Young People, addressed the working group on the role and functions of the Office. Furthermore, the Commission liaised with NSW Police regarding extra patrolling for schools during international crisis.

3.7.2 Public Discourse working group

Purpose: To contribute to and influence public discourse for the purpose of building community harmony.

The objectives of the public discourse working group included to monitor and examine public discourse and its impact on communities, to promote positive messages to mainstream and ethnic media and to encourage networking to enhance co-ordination and information sharing and to support each others' strategies in delivery of consistent key messages.

The public discourse working group met on three occasions. Due to the broad and long-term scope of the working group, tangible outcomes were more difficult to define. The working group prepared press releases, compiled positive stories from communities which were disseminated to ethnic and mainstream press via the Commission.

The Commission collected information on how to lodge complaints with the Anti-Discrimination Board, the Australian Broadcasting Authority and the Commercial Broadcasters Association. Practical information and ideas from anti-racism websites were disseminated to help individuals and communities combat racism and religious prejudice and information was compiled from institutions which conducted research on effective community action to combat racism.

The concept of acknowledging outstanding individual or organisational contributions to improving community relations by presenting awards was fused with the Volunteer Awards. This concept is being further developed by the Commission.

3.7.3 Arabic and Islamic working group

Purpose: To identify needs and concerns of Arabic and Islamic communities and suggest strategies, activities and programs to address these needs.

The Arabic and Islamic working group met on seven occasions. The Commission encouraged all organisations to send reports to and lodge complaints with the Anti-Discrimination Board of incidents of harassment and vilification and send copies to the CRC. The working group heard incident reports at each meeting and discussed methods of tallying the information to create a state wide snapshot of race-based harassment in NSW. The Commission disseminated information about the Australian Broadcasting Authority powers with respect to policing and prosecuting media outlets that breach 'code of ethics' and looked into the possibility of producing a "Know your Rights" pocket-sized card for wide distribution to people in the community. Members provided details of building and contents insurance problems for places of religious significance and community organisations.

A Department of Education and Training representative addressed reporting of incidents in schools and policies regarding anti-racism measures and disseminated a reporting of incidences in schools fact sheet in Arabic to the working group. Mr Brendan Stewart, from the Council for Australian-Arab Relations, was invited to the February Reference Group meeting at the request of the working group. The Commission disseminated information from the Australian Red Cross about people seeking information about families in Iraq and about local resources for Arabic-speaking and Muslim communities.

3.8 Community Relations Crisis Management Plan (CRCM Plan)

The Community Harmony Reference Group requested that the Commission develop a Community Relations Crisis Management Plan (CRCM Plan), the purpose of which is:

To maintain and manage community harmony within New South Wales in response to local or international events which impact on relationships within the community and between people.

The CRCM Plan details the needs, objectives, roles and responsibilities of agencies and non-government organisations and community leaders, and the resources available to implement the plan. It also spells out the protocols and procedures to be followed in the event of an incident here or overseas which may have an impact on community relations.

The Community Relations Crisis Management Plan (CRCM Plan) was developed within five months and was signed off by CEOs of participating agencies (Appendix E). The success of the process resulted in a swift commitment by the relevant government agencies to the CRCM Plan. Police Commissioner Ken Moroney was particularly impressed with the strategy, writing that he would “like to commend the Community Relations Commission for taking this proactive step given the current international context and possible repercussions for the NSW community”.

The Commission is currently liaising with the NSW State Emergency Management Committee to incorporate the CRCM Plan as a subsection of the NSW DISPLAN (Disaster Management Plan). The CRCM Plan was written in conjunction with NSW Police, Department of Education and Training, Department of Community Services and the Anti-Discrimination Board.

3.9 Funding

The CRC assisted with the funding for:

- The Second International Interfaith Conference, March 2003
- The establishment of the Iraqi Australian Community Council through the translation of its Constitution

3.10 Assistance

The Commission has assisted in the promotion of a variety of community initiatives.

4. outstanding issues

4.1 Reporting of incidents

Many of the issues identified through the Reference Group and associated working groups were broad in their scope and involved long-term partnerships between government and communities. An issue that was often raised was the lack of reporting of race-based harassment to centralised systems, including the NSW Police, the Anti-Discrimination Board and the Commission. It was identified that some incidents are being reported to community organisations but an accurate picture was difficult to ascertain as multiple organisations were receiving information about the same incident. A centralised system was discussed to monitor race-based crime and harassment in NSW, driven by community organisations. The Commission developed an incident reporting sheet for community organisations that captures information about the incident.

4.2 Youth strategy

The Commission developed a youth strategy to ensure young people's involvement in community relations initiatives in NSW. A letter was written to JJJ regarding a forum for students from different religious schools to meet and discuss issues pertinent to their communities and religious background. It was envisaged that the forum would be broadcast over a number of weeks. Due to funding cuts to JJJ they do not currently have the resources to work in partnership with the Commission. The Commission also approached the Youth Advisory Council regarding a seminar for youth movement leaders to write a joint statement in support of community harmony.

4.3 ARCO

The Department of Education and Training has Anti-Racism Contact Officers placed throughout all schools in NSW and the Commission is in the process of exploring the concept of placing ARCOs across all government agencies in NSW.

5. evaluation

5.1 Review and Evaluation

To ensure wide community consultation and a transparency with regards to feedback, the Commission organised an evaluation seminar to be facilitated by an independent facilitator, Ms Maria Dimopolous from MyriaD Consultants.

5.2 Evaluation seminar

The systems, structures and outcomes of the Community Harmony Reference Group have been independently evaluated. An evaluation seminar took place on 24 June 2003 and approximately 20 community organisations took part in the process. Submissions from those who were unable to attend have been requested to enable full participation. The focus of the evaluation seminar was the examination of the Commission's role as the coordinating agency and how the Reference Group managed to fulfil the terms of reference of the project. (Appendix G). The evaluation seminar was facilitated by an independent facilitator, Ms Maria Dimopolous of MyriaD Consultants.

5.3 Summary of evaluation

The consultant provided a summary of the evaluation in her report which follows:

Comments received during the evaluation seminar have highlighted that the establishment of the CHRG was highly valuable in forming a meaningful relationship between community and government.

The key role played by the CRC in establishing, resourcing and maintaining the group seems to have assisted in building community relations and overall harmony in times of conflict.

The CHRG has also proved to be valuable in channelling communication to and from the communities that have been affected by the issues.

Additional 'successes' identified include:

- *Opportunity for members of the CHRG to develop and promote leadership through a number of different means on the issue of community harmony at a critical point in international and domestic developments*
- *Building consensus on the development of community harmony goals and strategies as a basis for broader community participation*
- *Expanding the knowledge and skills among community members for planning and local activities*
- *Building linkages among relevant community, government and non-government institutions, including educational facilities.*

However, despite the many positive outcomes, the continuation of negative media reporting and the lack of mainstream media representation in the CHRG seem to add to the frustration of group members and the communities they represent. The CHRG sees the task of influencing media as very difficult.

The question of where to from here for the CHRG also attracted a diverse range of views and opinions. Some view the CHRG as a short term strategy, pertinent and relevant only during crisis times. However, others see a continuing role for the CHRG in generating and maintaining community relations.

The involvement of the government in the CHRG is seen to be its strength, particularly in relation to support and the allocation of resources if activities and momentum are to be sustained. The CRC has a vision to host a Sydney based forum with representation from 30-40 diverse communities.

The importance of working proactively to build relationships with the media during peace times has been a key theme in discussions. It has been emphasised that the CHRG could work in partnership with institutions such as HREOC, the media and the police to facilitate positive community relations.

In depth macro and micro level analysis may bring forth further knowledge about the effectiveness of the CHRG. However, within the limited scope of this evaluation it can be stated that the establishment of the CHRG and its practical undertakings to respond to community issues on a short-term basis have been overwhelmingly successful. The issue of working in partnership with mainstream media might have been an overstated short-term objective. Engaging and assisting the media to report matters in a balanced way will require considerable planning/strategising on the part of the government and relevant community groups.

6. future directions

The evaluation seminar posed the question to the Reference Group participants about the future directions of the Reference Group.

Option 1

That the Commission explore the possibility of initiating a Sydney based forum, similar to that of the Regional Advisory Councils with an approximate membership of 30 to 40 people from diverse communities to exchange information. It will extend beyond the communities represented by the Reference Group.

A Metropolitan Advisory Council comprised of key community and religious leaders across Sydney to meet on a quarterly basis could carry on the networking and community relations work that was so successful for the Community Harmony Reference Group.

Since the 1991 Gulf War, the Community Relations Commission has acted in a responsive manner to crises on the local or international stage. The Community Relations Crisis Management Plan (CRCM Plan) maps out a proactive role for NSW government and community organisations in relation to crisis management. The formation of a structure that continues the networking, liaison and community relations work undertaken by the Community Harmony Reference Group would mean that if a crisis occurred, a structure would be in place to effectively deal with the ramifications.

Option 2

That the Community Harmony Reference Group be completely disbanded and not continue contact across communities via a government portal. The strength of the Reference Group was commonality of issue (Iraq/Bali) across communities and the motivation of the group would be difficult to maintain without strength of purpose.

It was noted that the existence of the group was superfluous if there was not a current crisis and the maintenance of the group during non-critical times may send the wrong message to the wider community of disharmony between participants of the Reference Group.

Option 3

That the Community Harmony Reference Group continue in its current form. It was perceived that closure of the Reference Group may reflect negatively on the community, and that since the Reference Group was formed because there was a crisis in community relations and this crisis has not abated yet, the closure of the group may result in a fallout.