



Speech by

ANITA PHILLIPS

MEMBER FOR THURINGOWA

Hansard 30 July 2002

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S CONFERENCE, TOWNSVILLE

Ms PHILLIPS (Thuringowa—ALP) (7.16 p.m.): On 3 July 2002 over 450 women from all over Australia and 24 countries gathered for the Townsville International Women's Conference, its topic being Poverty, violence and women's rights: setting a global agenda. While we should all have been feeling ecstatic over this marvellous achievement by local women, regrettably I was feeling ashamed that Australia, the host country, has a federal government that refused to grant entry visas to over 40 other women who had registered to attend and should have been there. These refusals were presumably under instructions from our paranoid terrorists-under-the-bed federal government. In waging its hysterical fear campaign designed to brainwash vulnerable Australian citizens, it has abused the rights of these highly respected women. We know how they were treated from the emails they sent apologising for not attending.

Dr Nighat Said Khan, an academic in Lahore, Pakistan, is in demand all over the world. It was a coup for the conference organisers to secure her as a keynote speaker. She had tried her best to get a visa, but was refused in no uncertain terms. She said—

I am furious at the manner in which we are being treated.

Dita Sari from Indonesia was to be another keynote speaker. She is a well-known activist for workers' rights who has travelled to Australia—and returned home to Indonesia—four times. She said that no amount of effort by her staff and herself personally had helped her succeed in dealing with the embassy. She said—

I came there time after time to be told to return another day.

She was not granted a visa nor given any explanation why.

Judith Katushabe from Uganda applied for a visa from the Australian High Commission in Nairobi. The excuse given to her was that she was only a secretary and, therefore, did not qualify to attend such a conference. She said—

Here in Uganda, you do not have to be someone important to attend such a conference, everyone has joined in the fight against violence, crimes and poverty ... We young ladies take the time, travel in rural areas, teach women ... We are about public awareness. Please try to talk to your government. Here at the Embassy they think everyone is lying.

Eight members of the Friends of Ghana International Incorporated applied to the Australian High Commission in Lagos, Nigeria and were refused. They were told that too many Ghanaians were attending the conference. In fact, only one woman was granted a visa. They said—

We are very much disappointed and it has been a big disappointment to our wonderful sponsors.

Five women from the Business and Professional Women in Uzbekistan were told at the Australian Embassy in Moscow that there was no reason for them to participate in the conference. Women from the Global Development Program in Pakistan applied to DIMA in Islamabad but were met with ongoing problems with their processing. They said—

We tried our level-best in this regard but all in vain.

Fifteen others from Ghana were refused by the Australian High Commission in South Africa, and five women from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were refused visas. The hardworking conference organisers were extremely disappointed to see so many applicants treated with contempt by our federal government agencies.

Time expired.