



THINKSTOCK

NEW DAWN: Opportunities on the rise in Africa

Africa needs more missions

Growing links with Africa require attention.

Australia's diplomatic representation in Africa is shrinking at the same time as the continent is growing in significance.

Federal parliament's Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Committee, which has completed a detailed investigation of Australia's relations with Africa, found our diplomatic representation in Africa has not kept pace with that of our major trading partners.

"The importance of Africa and African issues has increased over the past 25 years, but in the same period Australia's diplomatic presence has decreased from 12 posts to eight," committee chair Senator Michael Forshaw said when presenting the report prior to his retirement from federal parliament.

The committee has recommended a review of Australia's representation in Africa, with a view to opening an additional embassy in French-speaking Africa to fill the current gap in that region.

The committee also recommended the foundation of a Centre for African Studies at an Australian university in an attempt to encourage greater research into Africa.

"A centre will facilitate a coordinated approach to education and training both

at undergraduate and graduate level," Senator Forshaw said. "Further, it will establish a focal point for coordinating expertise on African issues."

With a mining boom across Africa attracting Australian resource companies into African mining projects, the committee has also called for Australia to implement the Extractive Industry Transparency Initiative (EITI), a process which requires governments to publish what they receive from mining companies which in turn publish what they pay.

"The EITI initiative promotes transparency and is aimed to reduce the risk of corruption," Senator Forshaw said.

Other recommendations include the development of a model regulatory framework for the resources industry that could be adopted by African governments; and greater coordination between government, non-government organisations and Australian resources companies to improve development aid delivery cooperation and social responsibility programs (see 'Deep impact' on page 50). •

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DEEPER TAX PROBE

Greater scrutiny of the Australian Taxation Office has been foreshadowed by federal parliament's financial watchdog.

The Joint Committee of Public Accounts and Audit already holds biannual hearings with the Commissioner of Taxation (pictured above) but has decided to undertake broader questioning of the ATO.

Committee chair Rob Oakeshott (Lyne, NSW) said at the next public hearing with the Tax Commissioner in September the committee intends to ask the ATO to detail how it takes on board and responds to reviews by other agencies, plus issues raised by industry and consumer groups.

"Integrity in tax administration is a critical foundation block of the Australian taxation system. Whilst evidence suggests in the majority of cases this is done well, the committee is concerned about the increasing number of complaints about the ATO," Mr Oakeshott said.

The committee's report has made a number of other recommendations aimed at increasing parliamentary scrutiny of the tax office, including the ATO reporting on what action it has taken to improve complaint handling and to address the underlying causes of these complaints.

The committee has also called for updates on the status of the 900 current cases of compromised tax file numbers, including what the ATO is doing to resolve the issue and their reasons for any delay. •

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