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AUSTRALIAN HIGH COMMISSIONER VISITS MEGHALAYA

Shillong, March 10, 2004: The Australian High Commissioner to India, Ms Penny Wensley AO, paid an official visit to the North Eastern State of Meghalaya on 10-14 March 2004, to inaugurate the Australia-India Shillong Urban Water Supply and Environment Sanitation Project.

"The Shillong Urban Water Supply and Environment Sanitation Project designed to bring about institutional and other changes that will improve significantly the quality of water and sanitation services in Shillong. We expect these changes to have considered benefits for the health and well-being of the population of the city', said Ms Wensley.

The project is implemented jointly by the Government of Meghalaya agencies and an Australian contractor, Kellogg Brown and Root. It will involve close engagement with communities in the greater Shillong area. The Australian Government will contribute approximately A\$7.65 million (Rs 27 crores) to the current two-year phase of the project.

The High Commissioner will inaugurate the project office and visit a centre being established by the project manage geographical information. Accompanied by Mr Kerry Grieves, Senior AusAID representative to India, she will also visit the Mawphlang dam and water treatment plant to gain a first hand appreciation of Shillong's water and sanitation needs.

During the visit, the High Commissioner will meet the governor of Meghalaya, Mr M M Jacob, the Chief Minister, Mr D D Lapang; other Ministers and senior officials, as well as community representatives connected with Australian funded development activities in the State.

In addition to focussing on Meghalaya's water and sanitation needs, Australia in paying particular attention to the HIV/AIDS epidemic in North East India. "Australia is at the forefront o regional and international efforts to combat HIV/AIDS. It is an area of priority focus for Australia's development cooperation in India. HIV/AIDS poses a significant threat to the well being and development of peoples of the North East and surrounding states and countries. Only concerted action by governments and local communities, with help from the international community, will slow the spread of this devastating pandemic", Mrs. Wensley stressed.

In Shillong, the High Commissioner will inaugurate workshop, funded by Australia to build the capacity of NGOs in the North East region to respond to the HIV/Aids epidemic. Since 1994, the Australian Government has provided around A\$ 1 Million (Rs. 3.5 crores) to support the efforts of local NGOs in North East India to help prevent the spread of the disease and to care for those infected with the HIV virus.