

Re: Pakistan's candidacy to the UN Human Rights Council

14 May 2008

Your Excellency:

We write to you as a coalition of international NGOs working collectively on the upcoming UN Human Rights Council election on May 21. We believe the annual election process is an important opportunity to select members to the Council that have demonstrated a commitment to the promotion and protection of human rights.

We would specifically like to draw your attention to Pakistan's candidacy for a second term to the Council. In the past several years, human rights organizations have been deeply concerned about abuses under the Musharaf government and the poor performance of Pakistan on the Human Rights Council. On the domestic level, human rights violations were particularly flagrant during the period of emergency rule imposed in November 2007, including the arbitrary arrest and detention of judges, lawyers, journalists and human rights defenders, enforced disappearances, extra-judicial killings, and torture. In addition, the government imposed restrictive measures to eliminate any dissent or criticism voiced by political activists.

We recognize this year's February elections, in which the citizens of Pakistan voted a new government into power. We welcome the positive steps that the new government has taken to redress earlier restrictions on civil and political rights inside Pakistan, including the release of judges held under illegal house arrest, the repeal of laws that limit the freedom of the press, the restoration of rights exercised by workers organizations. We also welcome the recent ratification of the *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Economic Rights*, along with the signing of two other treaties: the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR)* and the *Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT)*.

Before the election of the new government, Pakistani civil society organizations opposed Pakistan's candidacy for a renewed seat on the Council based on its past record. However, in light of recent positive developments, these organizations have now urged the new government to distinguish itself from the previous government by making commitments that protect and uphold human rights standards both domestically and internationally.

We strongly support the position taken by Pakistani civil society organizations in their April 18, 2008 letter to the Foreign Minister of Pakistan. We also reiterate their call for Pakistan to demonstrate responsible leadership at the Human Rights Council.

Specifically, we urge Pakistan to commit itself to:

- Supporting broad and equal attention by the Council to all serious human rights situations around the world, including through existing permanent agenda items, special sessions, new mandates, and other Council mechanisms;
- Playing a constructive role in the UPR process, by conducting an equal and objective assessment of the human rights records of all states, regardless of regional, cultural, or geo-political ties;
- Supporting the further strengthening of and cooperation with the special procedures, both country-specific and thematic;
- Supporting the independence of the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights;
- Addressing the issue of discrimination and incitement to hatred in the appropriate human rights context, and ensuring that treatment of these issues does not restrict freedom of expression or infringe on the mandate on Freedom of Opinion and Expression that monitors violations of this right.

U.N. Member states can play an important and constructive role in the lead up to this month's election. We ask that you consider these concerns and raise them with your Pakistani counterparts in the context of your discussions on the elections. Our hope is that UN member states will take advantage of this opportunity to exercise their influence in a way that strengthens the integrity of the Council and ensures the body is well-equipped to address the serious situations that demand its attention.

Sincerely,

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