

Report of Regional Panel on Asia and Oceania April 29th, 2005

According to the format established for the III Ministerial Conference of the Community of Democracies, the Regional Panel on Asia and Oceania had a meeting to elaborate the proposals of regional commitment to be included in chapter VII of the Ministerial Declaration.

The Panel was chaired by the Minister of Ethnic Affairs and Local Governance of New Zealand, Chris Carter, and rapporteur the Head of Delegation of Mongolia, Mr. Sangajav Bayartsogt, Cabinet Minister, MP, Chief of Government Secretary of Mongolia. Also present were NGO's representatives from Burma, China, Singapore and Vietnam. The motivator of the Panel was Mrs. Pauline Tamesis, from the UNDP:

The Chair in his introduction remarks mentioned the importance to focus the discussion in three topics:

- 1.- What are the main elements to promote democracy
- 2.- The role of Civil Society
- 3.- Institutions to support

The Motivator made a presentation about the democracy in Asia and Oceania; in order to start discussions. In her points Mrs. Tamesis described that in our region there were three main points to address:

- a.- Sketching the Democracy and Governance Landscape in the region
- b.- The deficits of democratic governance in the Asia Pacific region
- c.- Ideas for moving forward the democracy and governance agenda in the region.

In sketching the democracy in the region she described the great diversity of cultures existed in our region, and the importance that most countries in the region are committed for a culture and environment of democracy and good governance. She mentioned that countries are also demonstrating commitments to widening democratic participation and representation as well ensuring greater accountability through different constitutional measures.

About the deficits was described the insufficient opportunities for participation; the predominance of the executive and lack of legislative and judicial independence; dearth of fair and pluralistic elections; unsustained commitment to reform and lack of comprehensive policy debates and insufficient participation of civil society.

To move forward in our commitment to promote democracy, she expressed a more effective popular representation and diversity of representative groups and the strengthening of the rule of law and established a better access to justice for the poor.

In the ensuing exchange of views, participating delegations made a number of points, some of which will have a global application, though they have a particular manifestation in our large region.

We heard the opportunities and challenges of globalization. As the world surges ahead with social and economic transformation, we must take care that groups are not left behind.

It is the disaffected groups that challenge our democracies by attacking the strength of our democracies, as the Vice Minister of India so eloquently said. Many of the representatives stressed the role of the media and especially now in the era of the developed communications, in some countries that are not yet democracies there are threats to the free exchange of information, through the Internet and other means.

The outcome of the recent meeting of the New and Restored Democracies held in Ulaabaatar was detailed, particularly the work on parliamentary forums, civil society reform, the formulation of a plan of action, and developing a set of Democratic Governance Indicators, which are nationally-owned.

The NGOs focused our attention on some countries from our region that do not yet accept the importance of democratic principles and other situations such as lack of free press, repression of opposition leaders and of defenders of human rights. The Community of Democracies was requested to speak out collectively on their behalf. Also, the NGOs called for the need to ensure that any policy, legislative or other measures that undermine the rule of law and civil be reviewed and, if necessary, amended or abolished. Finally, many agreed that there was a need to enhance religious freedom in the region, to foster dialogue and tolerance. Calls for the participation in the World Forum for Democratization of Asia were mentioned. And the question that arose was how should we address those countries? By shunning them? Or by reaching out and engaging with them.

We also heard about the corrosive effect on our democracies of corruption, and about efforts in regional organizations to eliminate corruption. Where the rule of law is widely respected, as is in strong democracies, corruption has no room to flourish. The need to assist in the recovery of illegally obtained assets of corrupt officials was raised.

Other delegations reminded us of the fundamental importance for upholding the rule of law including through development assistance.

There were suggestions that new regional organizations may be needed along the lines of the new Budapest International Center for democratic Transition. On the other hand, former Prime Minister of New Zealand, representing the Madrid Club, suggested that the “fast track” to progress will come from using our existing regional and international architecture.

Engagement with civil society was a constant theme. Our exchanges benefited from the contributions of the NGOs.

We agreed on the following regional commitment:

- 1.- Support consolidation and promotion of democracy. Fight corruption.
- 2.- Cooperate, not only with and among States, but with civil society organizations to promote democracy and development.
- 3.- Build capacity through direct exchange among countries with a special focus on education.

Keeping in mind the critical role of political leadership in shaping democracy, and harnessing the potential of information and communications technology in strengthening democracy.

The working group commits to undertake the actions in cooperation with relevant existing institutions.

Summary of Discussions and Recommendations of the Asia Pacific Regional Working Group:

Three key actions:

- 1) Support consolidation and promotion of democracy
- 2) Cooperate, not only with and among states, but also with civil society organizations and the private sector in strengthening democracy and development
- 3) Build capacity, including the use of a 'tool box' approach, direct exchange among countries, dialogue with special focus on education.

Three substantive areas where these actions are to be applied:

- 1) in fighting corruption and in the recovery of illegally gained wealth of corrupt leaders
- 2) in poverty eradication, and
- 3) in strengthening good governance.

This actions will be taken in the context of the remaining challenges for democracy, such as:

- 1) cross border terrorism
- 2) vulnerability of emerging democracies.

Keeping in mind the critical role of political leadership in shaping democracy, and harnessing the potential of information and communications technology for the opening avenues for democracy and strengthening accountable and transparent governance.

The working group commits to undertake actions within existing institutions.