

DEMOCRACIES CALLED UPON TO ENSURE NEW UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL IS CREDIBLE

NEW YORK, September 19, 2005 -- The United Nations Democracy Caucus must ensure that the new UN Human Rights Council is a credible body, unlike its predecessor, the Human Rights Commission, a coalition of human rights and pro-democracy organizations declared today at the UN.

In a statement delivered to the foreign ministers of democratic countries, the Campaign for a UN Democracy Caucus called for the Human Rights Council to be composed of rights protectors, not violators. It also criticized democratic nations for not advocating hard enough for a credible UN human rights body.

The UN Democracy Caucus is an outgrowth of the Community of Democracies, a global coalition of over 100 democratic and democratizing nations committed to the promotion and strengthening of democracy and human rights, including at the UN.

The Campaign for a UN Democracy Caucus is coordinated by the Democracy Coalition Project, Freedom House, and the Transnational Radical Party. For more information about the campaign, including a complete list of its member organizations, please visit: www.democracycaucus.net

The text of the statement follows.

STATEMENT ON BEHALF OF THE CAMPAIGN FOR A UN DEMOCRACY CAUCUS DELIVERED BY TED PICCONE, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, DEMOCRACY COALITION PROJECT, AT THE MINISTERIAL MEETING OF THE UNITED NATIONS DEMOCRACY CAUCUS

UNITED NATIONS, SEPTEMBER 19, 2005

It is an honor for me to share with you a perspective from civil society of the important contribution the democracy caucus can make toward our common goal of strengthening the United Nations for the 21st century, particularly its work in the area of democracy and human rights.

For the nongovernmental community, the Santiago meeting of the Community of Democracies last April broke new ground by including us in an active and open dialogue with ministers. We welcome today's opportunity to continue these exchanges and look forward to remaining fully engaged in the important work of strengthening international cooperation for democracy promotion.

In the wake of last week's summit, there is cause both for celebration and great concern about the future direction of the United Nations and the ability of its member states to move beyond the gridlock of the past to a future that responds to the demands of a new era.

Many of us in the nongovernmental community were pleased with the commitment of new resources to fulfill the UN's mission to promote democracy and protect human rights. The doubling of the budget for the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights over the next five years is a positive breakthrough that will bring much-needed expertise to the field. In addition, the creation of a new UN Democracy Fund, with strong support from leaders of the Community of Democracies, is concrete evidence that democracy, as the final outcome document states, is in fact a universal value of concern to all states. The nongovernmental community involved in democracy promotion looks forward to playing an active role on the Democracy Fund's governing board as well as in implementing projects and activities to strengthen and consolidate democratic principles and practices.

The inability of governments to agree on key details regarding the Human Rights Council was a great disappointment to many of us. Secretary General Annan's proposal to replace the Human Rights Commission with a standing Human Rights Council made up of states that abide by the highest human rights standards remains a critical step toward realizing the promise of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Advocates for human rights from around the world have joined hands to support this ambitious proposal because they know from first-hand experience what's wrong with the system. They see how the very governments which deny their fundamental freedoms at home have succeeded in blocking any honest scrutiny or condemnation of their behavior. It was these same states which insisted on watering down the strong draft text negotiated by General Assembly President Ping and his team of facilitators. Many of us are left to wonder: where was the Democracy Caucus in this fight?

As the next round of negotiations moves ahead, those of us who believe in an effective UN now have the chance to win back the field. We need to ensure that the new Human Rights Council has the mandate and composition to be received credibly around the world. To reach that goal, we believe that a combination of elements must be adopted to make the Human Rights Council function effectively.

-- It must respond to urgent and ongoing human rights violations and, therefore, it must be a standing body.

-- Special procedures and arrangements for NGO participation practiced by the current Human Rights Commission must be preserved.

-- Candidates that want to sit on the Council must demonstrate a commitment to protecting human rights and be held accountable to that commitment through immediate peer review.

-- And they must win two-thirds support from the General Assembly to serve. As the Secretary General has remarked, membership on the Council should be a privilege, not a right.

The aim of establishing a credible Human Rights Council should be a top priority for the Democracy Caucus. We hope a working group of its members will be created immediately to lead the way in talks this fall. We urge the Caucus to insist on a recorded vote on key issues relating to the new Council and not permit the desire for consensus to block meaningful reform.

Most importantly, members of the Democracy Caucus should themselves become candidates for the Council and pledge to support each other when it comes time to vote in regional blocs and at the General Assembly. And, for the sake of restoring the UN's reputation, Democracy Caucus members should vote against states with a record of blatant human rights violations.

The Community of Democracies, under the leadership of Mali, urgently needs to strengthen its activities here at the UN and at other fora. More resources, both financial and human, should be devoted to it by its members. For years, the establishment of a secretariat for the Community of Democracies has been a key demand of the non governmental community. It is time to match the new challenges facing the Community of Democracies with adequate structures and resources.

In conclusion, as we reflect on what was and was not accomplished at last week's summit, one lesson becomes clear: the democratic states represented in this room must lead the way. You, after all, represent a majority of the UN's membership. Help us prove wrong the critics who say that the UN is forever mired in gridlock and cannot be an effective voice for human rights. We stand ready to work together with you in this noble cause.