

An Appeal to the United Nations Democracy Caucus

December 16, 2004

**To: Ambassador Heraldo Muñoz, Permanent Mission of Chile
Chair of the UN Democracy Caucus and Community of Democracies
Convening Group
All Missions Participating in the UN Democracy Caucus**

The current session of the United Nations General Assembly marks a turning point in the establishment of a functioning caucus of democratic governments committed to the promotion of democracy and human rights. Thanks to your government's efforts and those of other member delegations of the Community of Democracies, the UN Democracy Caucus has met for the first time in New York at the Foreign Ministers level, as well as at the Permanent Representative and expert staff levels. We hope that these positive steps toward implementing the commitments made by the Community of Democracies, which so many of us have called for, will pave the way for real and much needed reforms in the UN human rights system.

We commend the leadership shown by Chile, as Chair of the Community of Democracies process, in building consensus on democracy and human rights resolutions currently before the UN General Assembly. We support, in particular, the Democracy Caucus' call to all Community of Democracies participating governments to give positive consideration to four specific resolutions:

- "Torture and other inhuman or other degrading treatment or punishment" submitted by Denmark;
- "Promotion and cooperation among religions," submitted by the Philippines;
- "Enhancing the role of regional and subregional and other organizations and arrangements in promoting and consolidating democracy," submitted by Romania, United States, Peru and Timor-Leste; and
- "Improvement of the status of women in the U.N. system," submitted by Australia.

We urge the Community of Democracies governments to vote for these resolutions when they are brought before the UN General Assembly for a final vote this year.

Despite this progress, we were very disappointed by the failure of the Democracy Caucus to rally support for critical resolutions concerning the grave human rights situation in Sudan, Belarus and Zimbabwe. As a result of continued resistance by some democratic governments toward condemning even the worst cases of human rights violations in these countries, the UN General Assembly's Third Committee blocked any action by the UNGA regarding these countries. We strongly oppose the argument proffered by some governments that country-specific resolutions should be avoided on grounds that they constitute undue interference in internal affairs. We call upon the Democracy Caucus to take the lead in holding authoritarian governments accountable for the glaring abuses committed against their citizens in violation of the UN's own human rights principles.

We appeal especially to the Democracy Caucus to urge approval and implementation of the draft resolution on Burma (Myanmar), in particular its call on the military junta to end systematic violations of human rights, restore democracy and release Daw Aung San Suu Kyi and all other detained or jailed political prisoners. Likewise, we urge Democracy Caucus support for the resolutions on the human rights situation in Turkmenistan, which narrowly passed the Third Committee, and in Iran.

As the Secretary General's High Level Panel reminds us, however, the severe legitimacy crisis facing the UN Human Rights Commission "casts doubts on the overall reputation of the United Nations." The High Level Panel's report correctly observes that setting standards to protect human rights "cannot be performed by States that lack a demonstrated commitment to their promotion and protection." Likewise, we agree that "in recent years States have sought membership on the Commission not to strengthen human rights but to protect themselves against criticism or to criticize others."

We categorically reject, however, the High Level Panel's recommendation that membership of the Commission on Human Rights be expanded to universal membership. Having 191 governments jointly responsible for responding to violations of human rights and strengthening their protection would be the death knell of the Commission and a guaranteed recipe for gridlock, endless debate and inaction. As seen just last month with the failure of the UNGA Third Committee to act on Sudan, Belarus and Zimbabwe, such a change would lead to complete failure of the UN's own mandate to protect and strengthen human rights.

We believe that the path toward serious reform of the UN Commission on Human Rights must begin with limiting membership on the UNCHR to those states which demonstrate a genuine commitment to the UN human rights system by, for example, ratifying the main human rights conventions and cooperating with the Commission's investigators and special rapporteurs. We call upon the Democracy Caucus to work toward this important reform. Likewise, members of the Community of Democracies should affirmatively support one another's candidacies for seats on the UNCHR as well as on the Economic and Social Council, and encourage each other to prepare and vote on thematic and country-specific resolutions which uphold the UN's own human rights standards.

The Democracy Caucus itself cannot function effectively as a collective force for democracy and human rights unless its membership is limited to states which meet the Community of Democracies' own criteria for participation, thereby excluding countries where there is a "severe persistent erosion of or which lack essential elements of democracy." We strongly urge the Convening Group governments to uphold this standard when determining invitations to the Third Ministerial Meeting in Santiago next May. (For a comprehensive assessment of which countries should be closely scrutinized before inviting them to Santiago, see <http://www.santiago2005.org/>, or www.demcoalition.org.)

In sum, we call upon the members of the UN Democracy Caucus to recommit themselves to strengthening the UN human rights system by working together to support resolutions on Burma, Turkmenistan and Iran; to propose criteria for membership on the UN Commission on Human Rights; and to play a more active role as members of the UNCHR and ECOSOC.

Sincerely,

[*SIGNED*]

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