

PRESS RELEASE
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
CONTACT: Michael Goldfarb
212-514-8040 x12

DEMOCRACIES MUST SUPPORT UN HUMAN RIGHTS REFORM

Foreign Ministers Meeting in Chile Presents Important Opportunity to Strengthen Democracy Worldwide

NEW YORK, April 27, 2005 -- The Community of Democracies meeting this week in Santiago, Chile presents a crucial opportunity to strengthen international efforts to promote democracy and human rights worldwide, a group of nongovernmental organizations said today.

Foreign ministers and senior officials from all over the world will gather in Santiago April 28-30 for the third Community of Democracies (COD) meeting. The COD, launched in June 2000 in Warsaw, Poland, unites over 100 democratically elected governments and countries in transition to democracy. It seeks to improve cooperation among democratic states in global and regional institutions, coordinate efforts to deepen respect for human rights and democracy, and support emerging democracies. The last ministerial meeting took place in Seoul, Korea in November 2002.

The meeting will be particularly important in light of recent proposals by United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan for UN reform in the area of democracy and human rights. The NGOs -- Freedom House, the Democracy Coalition Project, and the Transnational Radical Party -- have urged the ministerial group to endorse the Secretary General's proposal to replace the much criticized UN Human Rights Commission with a smaller UN Human Rights Council.

A permanent UN Democracy Caucus, itself an outgrowth of the COD process, now exists, and the Caucus should function as a cohesive bloc at the United Nations in its deliberations on democracy and human rights.

"The Democracy Caucus is still weak, and as a result, gross human rights violations continue to get a free pass at the UN," said Ms. Windsor. "It is therefore of extreme importance that the current leadership of the Community of Democracies emboldens, empowers, and unites the Caucus. An endorsement of the Secretary General's plan would be a significant step toward correcting the worst flaws of the UN's current human rights regime," she said.

The NGOs expressed concern that the invitation process for government needs to be reformed, given the decision to invite a number of governments that clearly do not meet the democratic criteria of the Community of Democracies.

Invitations were made by a Convening Group composed of Chile, Czech Republic, India, Mali, Mexico, Poland, Portugal, Republic of Korea, South Africa, and the United States. They expressed particular concern over the decision to invite Russia and Venezuela as full participants. Both countries have experienced pronounced democratic backsliding and the erosion of political rights and civil liberties since the last COD meeting in 2002. In December, Freedom House downgraded Russia to "Not Free" in its annual global survey of freedom, "Freedom in the World," due to the further concentration of political authority, harassment and intimidation of the media, and other setbacks. Venezuela, which is rated "Partly Free" in the survey, has attacked non-governmental organizations engaged in democracy and human rights promotion for receiving funding from international sources.

"The COD is urged to uphold its own standards, which include not inviting countries where democracy is disrupted or severely degraded," said Theodore Piccone, executive director of the Democracy Coalition Project. "In the case of Nepal, where the king has suspended the

democratic process in the face of a Maoist insurgency, the COD did the right thing by revoking its invitation to the Santiago meeting," he said. "It should have done the same with Russia and Venezuela given the steady deterioration of democracy we see there."

"While most governments invited to Santiago meet the formal criteria, the COD should adopt a transparent mechanism to monitor and assess governments' adherence to democratic standards, with a particular emphasis on the respect of free and fair elections, as set forth in the COD's own Warsaw Declaration, Seoul Plan of Action, and the Convening Group's own Criteria for Participation," said Matteo Mecacci, UN representative of the Transnational Radical Party. "For cases of real crisis, the COD should create special working groups to monitor the situation on the ground and construct common approaches to facilitate a transition to democratic rule."

The three groups, together with numerous other NGOs and civil society leaders, will participate in the Santiago meeting, a positive step towards integrating nongovernmental voices into the COD process and an opportunity for civil society to make its specific concerns heard. "We are hopeful that the Santiago meeting will allow for genuine dialogue between the governmental and nongovernmental participants," said Ms. Windsor.

Additional background information on the Community of Democracies and the UN Democracy Caucus is available at:

Community of Democracies Nongovernmental Forum: www.santiago2005.org

The Campaign for a UN Democracy Caucus: www.democracycaucus.net

Democracy Coalition Project: www.demcoalition.org