

HUMAN RIGHTS CAUCUS ASSESSES WSIS OUTCOME

GENEVA, DECEMBER 12, 2003 -- The civil society Human Rights Caucus of the World Summit on the Information Society is relieved that a major setback in the international consensus on human rights has been avoided in the final declaration of Principles. The Caucus, which includes more than 45 organizations, has been working since the first preparatory meetings 18 months ago to ensure that human rights are not left off the WSIS agenda.

The Caucus contributions have somewhat been taken into account. We are pleased that the document begins with human rights. The first four paragraphs include many principles that are supported by the human rights caucus. The essential principles of universality and indivisibility are reiterated and there are references to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as well as to the Vienna Declaration and the UN Charter. We are also pleased that Article 19 of the UDHR is quoted in full rather than in an abridged version as some delegations were proposing. We feel that the human rights section of the document would be much weaker had we not been active throughout the process. We deplore however the absences of any reference to the fundamental principle of nondiscrimination as well as to international labor standards.

But beyond principles, there is the question of enforcement. The Plan of Action is devoid of any mechanism to advance the human rights agenda. The human rights caucus, supported by the civil society plenary, and the International Symposium on the Information Society, Human Dignity and Human Rights (convened by the People's Movement for Human Rights Education in November 2003) proposed an Independent Commission on the Information Society and Human Rights, composed of highly qualified experts with a broad geographical representation, to be established to monitor practices and policies on human rights and the information society. This is particularly urgent, given the tendency in many countries – both North and South -- to sacrifice human rights in the name of “security”.

The discussion around security would have been enhanced by a clear understanding that true security can only be achieved by measures that are fully compatible with international human rights and particularly the right to privacy. We deplore the emphasis that continues to be placed on creating a “global culture of cyber-security” which aims at “enhancing trade” instead of implementing human rights (paragraph 35).

Likewise, the caucus remains concerned that the rule of law and the regulatory framework are expected to “reflect national realities” instead of being consistent with the legally binding obligations of States according to the international human rights treaties they have ratified (paragraph 39).

At this Summit, the Human Rights Caucus has sought to provide a forum so that voices that have been silenced by authoritarian governments can be heard. In this light, we have brought some of the top international human rights advocates to speak about the situation in China and Tunisia. They are not the only countries with serious human rights problems. They stand however as proof that infrastructure alone is not enough.

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Documents and action reports of the Human Rights Caucus: www.iris.sgdg.org/actions/smsi/hr-wsis