

## **WSIS – The Human Rights Caucus stresses major advances despite attempts of blockage WSIS Civil Society Human Rights Caucus Communique – July 2, 2004**

After the conclusion of the first preparatory committee (PrepCom1) of the second phase of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS), which took place in Hammamet (Tunisia) from 24 to 26 June, 2004, the Human Rights Caucus is pleased with the noteworthy advances which the starting of the Tunis phase has finally shown, despite unacceptable practices of a number of agent provocateurs who attempted to disrupt the work of civil society organizations and to discredit the Caucus and its members.

The Caucus, which includes 50 organizations from around the world, has been working since the first preparatory meeting of the first phase of the Summit, in July 2002, to ensure that human rights are not left off the WSIS agenda, neither off its process.

### **Major advances which confirm that participating has been the right choice**

The first very positive sign was the accreditation of the 3 independent Tunisian NGOs which were able to meet the administrative requirements to attend the WSIS second phase as civil society. This way, the Tunisian Human Rights League (LTDH), Amnesty International-Tunisia and the Tunisian Association of Democratic Women (ATFD) are able to express themselves in their own names during the process.

Another major advance for the Caucus was the civil society intervention by Souhayr Belhassen, the vice-president of the LTDH and vice-president of the International Federation of Human Rights Leagues (FIDH), in which she addressed human rights in the information society on behalf of civil society. The Caucus wishes to thank the president of the Tunis preparatory process, the Latvian ambassador Janis Karklins, without whom this intervention could not have been presented in the government plenary on Saturday June 26, 2004. The Caucus also takes due note of the Tunisian authorities willingness to finally let Souhayr Belhassen present her statement.

These important advances show that the Caucus has made the right choice by resolutely refusing the boycott of the preparation of the Tunis phase, as would have been the easy way out.

A petition initiated by the Caucus and signed by approximately 50 NGOs in September 2003 has identified the commitment to allow all civil society representatives from Tunisia and abroad to participate freely in the work of the Summit as one of the concrete signs expected from Tunisia in favor of the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. This will be one of the conditions subordinating the participation to the Summit itself, which is scheduled to take place in Tunis in November 2005.

### **Unacceptable attempts of blockage by agent provocateurs**

Despite these first encouraging signs, the Caucus must deplore, together with the whole set of civil society organizations, the attempts of obstructing the work of the NGOs gathered in the civil society plenary session. An important number of people, presenting themselves as “the Tunisian

civil society”, seriously disrupted the process, until the announcement of ambassador Karklins decision. Systematic practices of disinformation, attempts to discredit the Caucus and its members, shameless room filling with people brought on site with buses, violent verbal aggressiveness against participants, hindrance to their simple expression by turning the meetings into chaos, were some of the means used by these agent provocateurs in order to forbid a representative of the LTDH from speaking in the name of the participating civil society organizations. By these means the agent provocateurs sought to prevent the statement, legitimately produced by the drafting committee mandated by the civil society plenary, according to the generally agreed rules and procedures since the beginning of the Geneva phase, be kept as written.

The Caucus particularly regrets that because of this situation civil society organizations have not been able to discuss under normal conditions the whole set of themes, which the WSIS second phase is dealing with, not least those related to Internet governance and to infrastructure financing.

The Human Rights Caucus participation has been crucial during the first phase of WSIS, by the number and the quality of its members as well as by the importance of its work. The Caucus organized a meeting on June 24, 2004 in Hammamet, which was very well attended, including the representative from the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. After the presentation of its composition, its missions and its past achievements, the Caucus encouraged new members to join, provided that they are organizations and not individuals and that they agree to the goal of protecting and promoting human rights standards in the WSIS process and in all countries of the world, not least the host country of the Summit. The Caucus will not allow a number of agent provocateurs to intimidate it with their attempts of discredit, just as it will not accept any takeover attempt by organizations or persons whose practices contradicts the least minimum of human rights standards.

On a similar note, the Caucus will, together with civil society as a whole, take measures to ensure that such outburst of abuses are prevented in the future. It encourages the authorities of the Summit host country, together with all the organizers, to make sure that the work may proceed in a calm and mutual respectful atmosphere, so that the progress reached after the Hammamet meeting may be pursued and acknowledged by all.

### **Encouraging future progress**

As goals for future progress, the Caucus hopes that many independent Tunisian NGOs finally receive the legal recognition they have been deprived of up to now, in general without any explanation, while some of them have been openly active for many years. The lack of recognition of their legitimate right to freedom of association prevents them from officially participating in the WSIS process. This is for instance the case of the National Council for Freedoms in Tunisia (CNLT), the Union for a Development Alternative (RAID, ATTAC-Tunisia), the International Association for Supporting Political Prisoners (AISPP), the Association for Fighting Torture in Tunisia (ALTT), the Observatory for the Defense of Press Freedom, Publishing and Creation (OLPEC), and many others. While WSIS claims exemplarity in opening United Nations activities to a stronger civil society participation, going as far as officially recognizing a “civil society

bureau”, the Caucus expects from the host country authorities that they locally translate this discourse into concrete measures by officially recognizing the legal existence of these groups.

In addition, the Caucus would like to restate its concern related to the exclusion of one of its members, Human Rights in China, the only organization for the defense of human rights in China. Human Rights in China has been excluded since the first phase of the Summit without any official explanation from the organizers.

The issue of accreditation is not the only concern of the Caucus and of the signatories of the September 2003 petition. The freeing of prisoners of opinion is one of the others. This PrepCom1 has been held less than a week after the postponement of the judgment in appeal in the case known as “the Zarzis Internet users” (les internautes de Zarzis), where persons, less than 20-years old, have been sentenced the very heavy penalty of 20 years jail. The evidence held against them are mainly documents which would have been downloaded from the Internet. If the Tunisian authorities have tangible elements of evidence justifying that Zarzis Internet users are charged with terrorism accusations, they should exhibit them publicly in the framework of a fair trial. Otherwise, the Caucus, like all international observers, would be obliged to consider, and to widely inform in the WSIS context and beyond, that the sole consultation of the Internet may cost 20 years jail in the host country of the WSIS second phase.

### **The Caucus will pursue its mission**

The Caucus has been created to put human rights on the WSIS agenda, with full respect of their universality and their indivisibility. Since there can be no democracy without fair development, the Human Rights Caucus is fully conscious of the fundamental importance of holding WSIS in Tunis, for the Tunisian people as well as for all the peoples of the global South countries, and thus, wishes its success. But since there can be no development without democracy, the Caucus will, during the Tunis process monitor the conditions in which this process is proceeding, and will report on obstacles to the exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the host country. In light of the general human rights assessment made in 2005, all the participants to the process, governments, international organizations, private sector and civil society, will be called for making their decision.

### **Representatives of the Human Rights Caucus in Hammamet:**

- Rikke Frank Jorgensen, DIHR - Danish Institute for Human Rights (DK) - Coordinator
- Antoine Madelin, FIDH - Fédération internationale des Ligues des droits de l'homme
- Meryem Marzouki, IRIS - Imaginons un réseau Internet solidaire (FR) - Coordinator

### **Press contacts:**

- Rikke Frank Jorgensen - [rfj@humanrights.dk](mailto:rfj@humanrights.dk)
- Antoine Madelin - [amadelin@fidh.org](mailto:amadelin@fidh.org) + 32 2 209 62 89
- Meryem Marzouki - [Meryem.Marzouki@iris.sgdg.org](mailto:Meryem.Marzouki@iris.sgdg.org)

### **Activities and documents of the Caucus during WSIS first phase:**

[www.iris.sgdg.org/actions/smsi/hr-wsis](http://www.iris.sgdg.org/actions/smsi/hr-wsis)