

Press Release

Sept. 28, 2006: International Right to Information day

FOI Laws must be Strengthened in Accordance with International Best Practices

Islamabad, Sept. 27, 2006: 'Existing freedom of information regime in Pakistan, consisting of Freedom of Information Ordinance (FOIO) 2002, Local Govt. Ordinance (LGO) 2001 and Sindh Freedom of Information Ordinance (SFOIO) 2006, are inadequate and must be improved in line with international best practices.' This was stated in a civil society **Declaration** issued at the conclusion of the two day "Regional Conference on Freedom of Information Regime: Making the Right to Information a Reality", hosted by the Centre of Peace and Development Initiatives, Pakistan (CPDI-Pakistan). The Conference was organized in connection with the International Right to Information Day on September 28, 2006.

Mr. Mukhtar Ahmad Ali, Executive Director, CPDI-Pakistan, said that the civil society declaration is expected to go a long way in promoting transparent and accountable governance through its focus on easy and cost effective access to information for the citizens. The declaration demands the improvement of existing FOI laws in accordance with international best practices including (a) obligation of government to publish; (b) promotion of open government; (c) limited scope of exceptions; (d) processes that facilitate access; (d) minimum costs; (e) open meetings; (f) precedence of disclosure; and (g) protection of whistle-blowers. It further demands that the parliamentary standing committees should announce their schedule of meeting in advance, share agenda of meeting and minutes with civil society, and disclose conflict of interest if any.

Mr. Muhammad Rashid Mafzool Zaka, the Senior Programme Coordinator at CPDI-Pakistan, explained the details of the declaration and added that the declaration emphasized access to information as the fundamental human right, which was a pre-requisite for good governance, democratic development and freedom of press. It, therefore, demanded that a joint effort between the civil society and the reform-oriented state functionaries must continue for the strengthening of existing FOI laws and their effective implementation.

Speaking at the Conference, **Mr. Shah Mehmood Qureshi**, MNA, highlighted that the existing system of governance was far too secretive and could not meet the requirements of 21st century. As it is, even members of the parliament face difficulties in accessing credible and useful information in a timely manner. He agreed that meetings of standing committees must be open to participation of all stakeholders especially the civil society organizations and media.

Dr. Tariq Rehman, Chairman, NIPS, Quaid-e-Azam University emphasized the importance of right to information for research and development, and attributed the culture of secrecy to certain myths spread by the elite to keep their hold on power. He also referred to the dominance of English language, which puts barriers on common persons access to information and power corridors. **Mr. I. A. Rehman, HRCP**, criticized the culture of secrecy in government, and characterized it as a main hurdle in democratic development and realization of other rights. He pointed out that right to information was not just an issue for media but it was important for all civil society groups and citizens. He demanded that that all State departments and offices must follow the policy of proactive disclosure regarding their policies, decisions, expenditures, staffing and implementation of various projects and programmes.

Ms. Sherry Rehman, MNA, informed the participants about her private member bill on freedom of information, which had been forwarded to the standing committee for

recommendations. She urged the civil society groups to be engaged in the related consultative process and present their point of views to the committee.

Mr. Ali Naqvi, IDSP Quetta, and **Ms. Shaheen Anam, Bangladesh**, stressed the need of appropriate legislative frameworks and information management systems, which meet the requirements of citizens. They also emphasized that FOI laws must ensure protection of whistle-blowers, that is, public functionaries disclosing malpractices or corruption in any state department should be protected.

Mr. Sarwar Bari, National Coordinator, Pattan, talked about the need for NGOs and media men to improve their credibility and do networking so as to exploit the potential opportunities for promoting transparency and accountability. **Mr. Zahid Abdullah**, CPDI-Pakistan, stressed the need of appropriate technologies and enabling environment for disabled people, so that they could also have access to information.

Mr. Wajahat Habibullah, Chief Information Commissioner, India, shared his experience of India where civil society activists like Ms. Aruna Roy lead a public awareness movement with regard to access to information, which persuaded the government to pass and implement Right to Information (RTI) Act in 2005. Under this Act, government is required to provide requested information including noting on the files, minutes of meetings, intermediary opinions, logbooks and email records. Even the records related to security agencies are accessible if the complaint relates to corruption and human rights violations.

Other speakers in the Conference included **Mr. Imtiaz Alam**, SAFMA, **Mr. Shaukat Omari**, former head of Transparency International, **Mr. Roland D' Souza**, Shehri, and **Mr. Mazhar Arif**, SAMAR.

The participants unanimously endorsed the eleven-point **Declaration** that lists the civil society demands for making the right to information a reality in Pakistan.

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