

Press Release

**Right to Know Day:
Parliamentary Initiatives for Strong Access to Information Laws Demanded**

Islamabad, September 28, 2006: On the 4th International Right to Know Day, which is celebrated around the world on September 28, Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives, Pakistan (CPDI-Pakistan) demands serious parliamentary initiatives for providing a credible legislative framework for access to information and transparent governance. Implementation of right to information is universally recognized as an effective anti-corruption tool. National Accountability Bureau (NAB) has also recognized its importance in its anti-corruption strategy. Despite all this, government has hardly made any serious effort to strengthen access to information laws and provide transparent governance. Even the latest reports that rank Pakistan at 146 out 159 on the corruption perception index have failed to move the government. This situation is, indeed, very disturbing and calls for greater civil society effort and serious parliamentary initiatives for the realization of citizens' right to information and promoting accountable governance.

In the first instance, parliament and parliamentary committees need to implement completely transparent procedures in their own functioning. Specifically, it is demanded that the parliamentary committees must (1) announce and publicize the agenda and schedule of their meetings in advance; (2) publicize the bills that are under-consideration for feedback from stakeholders; (3) hold their meetings in open - allowing presence of journalists and members of general public to watch committee proceedings; (4) organize public hearings on critical issues and problems concerning respective ministries/ departments; and (5) publish all information about agenda, schedule of meetings, minutes of meetings and recommendations on the website. The committees must not treat any discussion, proceeding or information as exclusive or confidential, until and unless there is a very good justification for doing so in exceptional circumstances. Such justifications, however, must be recorded in writing, and published on the websites of the National Assembly or Senate.

Parliamentary initiatives are also needed to strengthen the existing legislation of freedom of information. Freedom of Information (FOI) Ordinance 2002, which is currently in force, is hugely deficient. It declares a vast range of important government records as excluded or exempt from access by citizens. It also provides a very restrictive definition of 'record' or 'information'; and fails to provide a strong mechanism for handling complaints or appeals. It needs to be drastically amended to ensure that (a) exemptions are minimum and precisely defined; (b) government departments have an obligation to publish important information; (c) requested information is made accessible rapidly and fairly; (d) cost of information requests is small and affordable; (e) information is provided if the public interest in disclosure outweighs the protected interests; (f) laws that are inconsistent with FOI, like the Official Secrets Act 1923, are repealed; and (g) individuals who release information on wrongdoing –whistleblowers- are protected.

Recently, the National Assembly has referred a private member bill on FOI by Ms. Sherry Rehman to the standing committee on Ministry of Information. CPDI-Pakistan urges the members of the Parliament to give the bill a serious consideration. In particular, the Standing Committee on Ministry of Information must consult all stakeholders before finalizing its recommendations on the bill, so as to further improve the bill in line with international best practices and information needs of stakeholders.

CPDI-Pakistan also demands the Cabinet Division (Government of Pakistan) to review the Rules (2004) for the FOIO 2002. Such a revision is urgently needed to, among others, amend the application form and reduce application fee and photocopy charges.

Yours sincerely,

Zahid Abdullah
Project Manager

Access to Information and Transparency Program
Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives, Pakistan (CPDI-Pakistan)
Islamabad; Email:; zahid@cpdi-pakistan.org
URL: www.cpdi-pakistan.org