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Current and Future Trends of
the Human Rights and Democratisation Agenda
An EU Perspective
Commissioner Poul Nielson
10 September 2003

Thank you Chair, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Achieving democracy when decades of dictatorship come to an end is not an easy task. It is not just a question of holding elections. Instilling a culture of democracy and human rights, with properly responsive institutions, an independent judiciary, an informed electorate and a robust civil society takes training, resources, patience and time - as Afghanistan and Iraq well illustrate. There is no single method for moving to democracy. Countries which undertake this journey need to be able to rely on the experience of those who have managed to consolidate democracy. The 5th Conference of New and Restored Democracies is a unique and very useful forum in this respect.

With the imminent accession of ten new countries which have only quite recently consolidated their transition to democracy and human rights worldwide and with our close partnership with developing countries we know that governance and democratisation is not a luxury for better off nations but an essential element in the fight against poverty. The universality of the basic principles of democracy and human rights is self evident.

That is the 'why' I want to turn now to the 'how, to some of the issues which countries must address if they are to make a successful transition to democracy and human rights and the tools which the EU has at its disposal to assist in that process.

First, democratic governments must be legitimised by the holding of genuinely free and fair elections with universal suffrage.

During the last decade, the process of democratisation has manifested itself in many countries by the holding of multiparty elections for the first time. The right to participate in the establishment of governments through free and fair elections is a determining factor in building sustainable human development and lasting peace. The EU is committed to supporting election processes, through electoral assistance and observation missions (with over 20 observation missions in the last three years). Ensuring the independence of electoral control institutions and ensuring the transparency of campaign contributions are other important issues. However, as an end in themselves, elections alone will not necessarily make a country a democracy or give it the political stability for it to flourish. They have to be part of a broader process, in which a series of factors come together to prepare and consolidate a dynamic movement towards democracy. Transparency inside political parties and the role of the opposition are important aspects.

Permitting civil society to flourish is another vital attribute of democracy. The dynamic participation of civil society organisations in the public debate is a crucial step in establishing a climate conducive to

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economic and social development. The organisation of a self-confident civil society is also crucial to push for political liberalisation in authoritarian systems. The EU is committed to sustaining civil society organisations in third countries, not least through the *European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights* launched in 1996.

In order to be credible, democracies must also respect all human rights and abide by their international commitments to human rights. That means signing and ratifying the main human rights' international instruments and implementing them. It means accepting scrutiny within the UN framework - I note here that only 47 States have issued standing invitations to the Special Rapporteurs or Working Groups of the UN Commission on Human Rights, which provide valuable reports on specific human rights' issues through visits to countries across the world.

In our development co-operation agreements we place democratic values and human rights as essential elements. This is most clearly seen in the Cotonou Agreement with 78 countries in Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific areas. This provides the basis for structured exchanges on democracy and human rights with third countries, backed up by concrete co-operation programmes and with a view to facilitate concrete progress on the ground.

Inevitably we get stuck in situations and cases where things go wrong. And ultimately both we and our partners in development co-operation know, that we have to work in a manner that secures public support in our countries. Fighting for democracy and against corruption and violation of human rights is therefore also a contribution to strengthening the global fight against poverty.

But doing this in the manner of preaching, prescribing or dictating is not a way forward. We need to reinvent the notion of governance in its original meaning: A more pragmatic and less formal way of looking at a political system's ability to provide the basic elements and services that secure the functioning of a society. Peace, stability and some emerging decency - I mentioned already a spirit of compromise - is the starting point from where governance leads to democracy.