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**Promoting Democracy and Responding to National and
Transnational Threats to Democracy**

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**Session I: The Role of the Community of Democracies in the Promotion of
Democracy**

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen.

It is an honour to speak at this session of the Working Group of the Community of Democracies. I would also like to warmly thank Senator Gianni Vernetti for extending an invitation to the United Nations Democracy Fund to join this important gathering.

Since its creation, the Community of Democracies has promoted the vision of a more representative and effective United Nations. It is committed to advancing the United Nations' goals of development, security and human rights.

While not all United Nations members are democracies, all our Member States now accept democratization as something desirable, at least in principle. The 2005 World Summit Outcome Document states that "*we reaffirm that democracy is a universal value*" and "*we renew our commitment to support democracy by strengthening countries' capacity to implement the principles and practices of democracy and resolve to strengthen the capacity of the UN to assist member States upon their request*". In addition, democratic values are present throughout the activities of the whole UN system, even if in an ambivalent manner.

In the past decade, democratic transformation has become a reality in most parts of the world as powerful forces of democratic change within societies were freed from the constraints of the Cold War era. Today, 58% of the world population lives in multi-party democracies. In the last decade alone, more than 1.4 billion people have gained the right to choose their government through free and fair elections.

Yet there are presently threats to this advance of democracy, and some analysts speak of a “backlash”, a “pushback”, or of an “erosion” to democracy, or, as today’s working group meeting puts it, of “threats” to democracy.

Regardless of the choice of terminology, it is a reality that there are many challenges to democracy and good governance, and that the United Nations carries a responsibility to address them.

So how does the UN respond to these challenges to democracy?

First, it is important to recall that the UN has done more than any other organisation to promote democracy. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the General Assembly in 1948, enunciated the essentials of democracy. Ever since its adoption, it has inspired constitution-making in every corner of the world, and it has contributed greatly to the eventual global acceptance of democracy as a universal value.”¹

The development of human rights standards, the implementation of the right of all peoples to self-determination, the assistance to good governance, including the support to parliaments and electoral assistance have been among the key tools that the UN has used to promote democracy.

¹ “In Larger Freedom towards development, security and human rights for all”, Report of the Secretary-General A/59/2005 para 148.

In the area of electoral assistance for example, since its creation, the UN has received more than 330 requests for electoral assistance of which 223 resulted in technical support electoral projects. Presently we are providing assistance to 45 countries.

The UN has also served as a forum for the development of specific initiatives such as the movement of New and Restored Democracies, initiated by the Philippines and presently chaired by the State of Qatar, following the country's democratic transformation in the late 1980s. It also serves as a forum of consultation for the Community of Democracies.

This short summary shows that the United Nations activities to support democracy and democratization are not new.

Second, it is important to understand that processes of democratization are not linear. Sometimes the opening of authoritarian regimes leads to an exacerbation of political competition, of power relations and of social problems. The holding of elections can be the source of new tensions and rivalry. Creating a new balance and a solid foundation for political participation can take time and can lead to increased frustrations among citizens.

Yet at the same time, political processes are inherently dynamic. Sometimes a situation seems hopeless but a specific dynamic evolves. Professor Guillermo O'Donnell, Board member of the UN Democracy Fund, often points out that transitions have a certain degree of unpredictability and there is a formidable strength in democratic values and in the assertion of the dignity and freedom of human beings.

And third, challenges to democracy are not exclusive to developing countries. In advanced countries too the State faces a crisis of legitimacy, and the level of trust in faith in political parties and in institutions such as the Congress and the courts is at a record low.

At the same time, the notion of a single model of democracy, expandable to the whole world is being openly questioned.

In Latin America for example, recent years have shown strong evidence of the dynamic nature of electoral systems in Latin America, and of a certain degree of progress in overcoming the political and ethnic exclusion that has been such a profound source of trouble.

Yet number of democratically elected governments from the left are challenging the capacity of the present economic order to bring about the needed improvements in social welfare. The prevailing view in the region seems to be that democracy has delivered neither development nor protection to the poor. Throughout the world, national governments, even democratic ones, are increasingly seen as being unable to protect their citizens from scourges deriving from drug traffic, transnational crime, HIV/AIDS, global change or terrorism.

We also see that Latin American civil society is increasingly active and robust, and is often at the forefront of social change. The empowerment and involvement of such groups will be crucial in advancing democracy and the rule of law. Indeed, recent polling – Latinobarometro - suggests a need to give politics back its popular capacity for change. Only a fifth of those questioned express much faith in political parties, and only a quarter in the Congress and the courts. Only one in three is satisfied with the way their democracy works. There is an urgent need to respond to this dissatisfaction and restore confidence in democracy as a viable political regime.

Faced with these challenges, over the past decade, the UN has had some concrete results in countries in which it has assisted democracy and democratization. Most directly, this was done in countries where the UN was engaged in post-conflict peace-building. The creation of state institutions and the organization of elections have been standard tasks in many of these situations. There, the main challenge is identifying special needs of democratization processes in politically fragile situations.

While there have been some successes, there are of course gaps that need to be filled. Some have questioned the extent to which durable institutions have been created. It is clear that we need to do more and better to improve the quality of the democracy promoted in terms of accountability, transparency in decision-making, participation and inclusion and a constructive civil society.²

On the other hand, some have pointed out that in certain situations, UN standards might be too high. In Kosovo for example, the UN is emphasizing the building of democratic governance while large parts of the population remain without a job, economic conditions are poor and citizens have little stake in the present institutions. Some critics have said that, in such scenarios, we might do better with less democracy and more rule of law.

To respond to these challenges, the UN has started to focus on developing more effective methods to involve local populations. This is based on the belief that UN actions should be based on the acknowledgement that democratic governance depends not only on strong institutions, but on participation and accountability.

It is with this priority in mind that the UN Democracy Fund was established in July 2005. It received the support of the Community of Democracies at a very early stage at the Santiago Ministerial meeting even before its official establishment.

The Fund comes with the primary goal of promoting participation of civil society and of marginalized groups in political processes through the establishment of effective partnerships.

The Fund is presently implementing its first round of activities, funding the 123 best projects out of 1,300 concepts that had been submitted. It is starting to transfer US\$36 million to civil society organisations in 110 countries.

² See Edward Newman and Roland Rich (2004), The UN role in promoting Democracy, Between Ideals and Reality. Tokyo, UNU.

We have two Human Rights Commissions in Africa, Kenya and Nigeria, who will dedicate efforts to monitor the behavior of the law enforcement agencies during election time. Transparency Brazil has created a dynamic Internet portal that discloses interests of candidates running for public office, which has been very well received by many candidates themselves and will now monitor their performance in Congress. In Bolivia and Zambia, we are helping facilitate the constitutional reform deliberations; in Colombia, we support the dialogue that will hopefully lead to political reform. The rights of ethnic minorities in Thailand, Cambodia or Georgia, to name only a few, have been especially targeted by the Fund.

We are also supporting the Council of the Communities of Democracy and in particular the Civil Society network that operates in parallel. The idea behind the project is to remedy to the absence of a grassroots constituency that inhibits the effectiveness of the CD. It will develop extensive regional networks that will provide input for the CDs International Steering Committee and provide more adequate links between the governmental process and civil society.

In addition, half of the projects supported either strongly defend women's rights or gender equality in their activities. The message that democracy is not possible without women's full and equal participation is increasingly recognized and transformed into action.

The Fund is thus an expression of the conviction of the need to focus on participation as the best way to balance the threats to democracy. Its very philosophy is that one of the biggest threats to democracy is actually exclusion, and that only by promoting inclusive political processes will the quality of democratic transitions increase.

In a context where the legitimacy of some of the international activities to assist democracy are being questioned by some sectors, the best strategy to support democratization is to promote participation and the inclusion of a diversity of voices in political processes.

To conclude, it is increasingly recognized that the United Nations must champion the right of all people to choose their rulers as strongly as we have long championed the right of all peoples to live free of colonial domination.

Democratization is never easy. The urge for it must spring from the people of each nation. The role of the international community is a supporting role, giving the means to domestic and regional actors to implement the goals that they have defined for themselves.

But the United Nations must support democratization wherever it can. It must do so in a manner that is not coercitive and that stems from a consensus among the main parties.

We are particularly grateful for the support that we have received from many of the governments present here today to the Democracy Fund, in particular the United States and India as the major donors, as well as Korea, Poland, Chile, Sri Lanka, Lithuania, Portugal and others.

We are also pleased to engage in fruitful partnerships with many civil society organizations, including some that are present today such as IDASA for example. We look forward to working with all of you in this exciting project.

I also very much look forward to the ideas and policies that will emerge from today's dialogue as an important contribution to the work of the Democracy Fund and as part of the consultation process that will continue to further refine the doctrine of the Fund.