

29 October 2006

**Statement of H.E. Ms. Sheikha Haya Rashed Al Khalifa,
President of the 61st Session of the General Assembly,
at the 6th International Conference on New and Restored Democracies**

Excellencies,
Distinguished Guests,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to be here today at the Sixth International Conference on New or Restored Democracies. Let me begin by sincerely thanking His Excellency Shaikh Hamad bin Jassim bin Jabr Al-Thani, First Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, for inviting me to participate in this important event.

A recent worldwide poll on democracy covering 65 countries revealed that eight out of ten citizens supported democracy as the best system of government. In Africa it was nine out of ten.

Why is this?

I believe that democracy is so widely supported because it provides a framework to promote human development and human rights.

Democracy, the rule of law and human rights are interlinked and mutually supportive. They are the underlying principles behind the United Nations Charter.

In 2005, the Secretary General's Report on Threats, Challenges and Change confirmed the strong relationship between weak governance and global security challenges - such as terrorism, lack of development, corruption, international crime and money laundering - as well as slow economic growth.

And this is why this Conference is so important.

Not only is promoting democracy crucial to global security, it is also important in reducing poverty and promoting human development.

Democracy is a process. It takes time. That is why our continued support for emerging democracies and countries that want to become democratic is important.

All of us recognize that there is no single model for democracy; it cannot be imported. Each country has its own unique democratic path based on its history and political system.

However, the key principles of any democracy should include:

A system where government decisions on policy are vested in elected representatives;
 Free, fair and frequent election of these representatives;
 Freedom of expression; citizens being able to say what they think;
 Access to alternative sources of information from government - a free media;
 Having the right to form and join independent associations; and
 Inclusive citizenship where no one is excluded or discriminated against.

These principles are the essence of this Conference. Since its first meeting in Manila in 1988, 'The International Conference on New or Restored Democracies' has developed a sustained process for peace, democracy and development reaching out to a broader scope of groups.

Like democracy this has been a process too.

The Conference has grown in stature. Participation has grown considerably: 142 of the world's countries are participating here today, working together with a host of international organizations.

97 governments;

95 non-governmental organizations active in the field of democracy; as well as

65 parliaments are with us today.

We have witnessed a great deal of progress since the previous Conference in Mongolia in 2003. Many countries have developed their own indicators to measure democratic and social development; and, I am glad to see even greater involvement of parliamentarians at this Conference. The role of the representatives of the people - the link between the citizen and the state - is crucial to good democratic governance.

I hope that the outcome and follow up to this Conference will have an even greater impact.

Today I would like to talk about four key issues which I think are important to consider at this Conference. The first, is the importance of best practices in supporting democracy. The second is the role of the United Nations in promoting democracy. The third is the importance of good governance for development. And the fourth is the importance of concrete actions to follow up on this Conference.

Firstly, best practices: I think that democracy works best when freedom of expression, inclusive participation and transparency according to the rule of law are encouraged. when governments promote better living standards and the eradication of poverty. when values are shared and when the electorate and their representatives recognize that democratic practice comes with responsibility.

To create this environment, we need to focus on promoting quality education to foster critical thinking, understanding of the democratic process and democratic rights that are accessible to all.

I would like to pay tribute here to Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser Al-Misnad for her pioneering role in education development.

We cannot look at this purely on a national level. It must be coupled with initiatives that enhance the rule of law and promote economic decision-making to strengthen global governance. This requires effective multilateral institutions which provide an equal voice to all.

This leads me into my second point.. the role that the United Nations plays in advancing democracy and global governance.

Global democratic governance is important. And, the United Nations plays an important role mediating among competing interests to facilitate international consensus, using accommodation, negotiation and compromise.

In the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, world leaders reaffirmed democracy as a universal value based on:

Freedom of expression;

Freedom to determine one's own political economic and cultural systems; and

Full and open participation in the democratic process.

World Leaders also established the United Nations Democracy Fund to promote democracy institutions and facilitate democratic governance. It provides support for projects ranging from civil society empowerment and civic education, to promoting fundamental freedoms, accountability and transparency, nationally and internationally.

The Fund has received requests totaling 447 million dollars from countries all over the world. This demonstrates the demand for the United Nations' expertise to support new and restored democracies. However, so far the Democracy Fund has received only 51 million dollars. I would encourage all Members States that are able, to contribute to this Fund.

Within the United Nations family, the United Nations Department of Political Affairs, the United Nations Development Programme and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees have a key role to play in promoting democratic governance, particularly in post-conflict, peace building and emergency/humanitarian situations.

The United Nations also plays a leading role in enhancing accountability and transparency of governments especially by promoting South-South cooperation in order to fight corruption.

This work is important because good governance and democracy are imperative for development, which is the third key point I want to discuss.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Fourteen per cent of the world's population lives in states that have weak systems of governance, yet these people account for a disproportionate number - around 30 per cent or 385million - of the world's poor. The challenge of eliminating poverty means that we need to:

- Help conflict affected countries achieve peace and stability;
- Assist emerging states to avoid them from becoming failed states; and
- Help weak states transform themselves into well governed states.

These states are where many of the world's poor live, and they will stay poor unless things change. Development and reducing poverty - in any society - are not only about freedom from poverty, disease, and from conflict.

Development is also about the freedom to choose - to choose people to represent your views and make your views heard; to associate freely with others; to join a political party or a trade union; and to practice your own religion. These are basic principles endorsed by world leaders. Exercising these freedoms however must be within limits that do not infringe on the freedoms of others. We must all accept each other, embracing our similarities and differences.

These "freedoms to" are significant for the poor. Interviews conducted by the World Bank with 60,000 poor men and women worldwide indicated that poverty for them above all is about having no power and no voice.

Our best defense against inhumane conditions is a belief in our own humanity, but this can only be fully realized if our rights to be human are also realized.

Development is about getting good governance right. Good governance is based on three features - capability, responsiveness, and accountability.

Firstly, we must ensure capability. All governments need to be capable to get things done. build wells, provide health services to villagers. offer good education to children.

Secondly, we must ensure responsiveness. Governments must respond to the aspirations of their citizens through some kind of representative government, and that includes respecting people's civil and political rights.

Thirdly, we must ensure accountability. This means having to explain what you are doing, and answer questions on what you have done. It applies to public officials, ministers and governments. The international community has a responsibility to assist governments in building these three key features.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Good governance by definition is also about fighting corruption; they go hand in hand. Any plan to fight corruption must be part of a broader program to improve governance; otherwise we will never defeat poverty.

Corruption involves the abuse of public office for private gain and it can also take place in the private sector.

It takes away limited resources that would otherwise be spent on healthcare or education; and, hits poor people the hardest, particularly women. To combat this and ensure good governance we need to start by supporting civil society and the media, parliaments and trade unions, and communities so that people's voices are heard and governments are held to account.

That is why the exchange of ideas amongst - governments, parliamentarians, NGOs and international organizations - at this Conference is important; so that we can then translate these ideas into actions.

We know that the majority of new and emerging democracies are committed to three basic principles:

Reducing poverty;

Upholding human rights and international obligations; and

Improving public financial management, good governance and transparency, and fighting corruption.

The United Nations has a unique mandate and the legitimacy to work with governments to promote these principles.

The private sector is also important too - and poor people are the private sector - the farmers, the shopkeepers and entrepreneurs - that will help create the jobs that people need for their economies to grow.

I would like to take the opportunity here to commend the pioneering work of the recent recipients of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize Mohammad Yunis and the Grameen Bank. Thanks to their work, giving small loans to families and business now plays an important part in empowering the poor, tackling poverty, illiteracy and providing healthcare around the world.

So it is vital that the private sector - small, medium and large - can flourish in developing countries and provide jobs, investment, goods and services, and of course, the tax revenue that can help pay for public services and improve people's lives.

Good governance has to come from within. Only countries - led by their own people and their own governments - can make the changes that are needed to fight poverty.

And this cannot be done by simply adopting models from elsewhere. People need to do it for themselves.

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Our work certainly does not stop here, leading to my final point which is the importance of concrete follow-up to this Conference.

We can start by ratifying the United Nations Convention against Corruption - and demonstrating a commitment to establishing effective anti-corruption legislation.

We can also establish a more permanent Secretariat for the Conference to manage and follow-up activities. The General Assembly can play an important role supporting follow-up work in New York amongst Member States.

We can also promote cooperation between the New or Restored Democracies Conference and the Community of Democracies and encourage joint meetings and seminars in the future.

I would like to conclude by extending my support for the declaration drafted by Qatar and leave you with a quote from Voltaire who epitomized the spirit of democracy when he said,

"I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it"

Thank you.