

SECOND PHASE OF WSIS, 16-18 NOVEMBER, TUNIS
WSIS PLENARY STATEMENT BY ICTRC
ON BEHALF OF THE WEST ASIA AND MIDDLE EAST REGION

November 17, 2005

Dear Madam President, Honorable Delegates, Civil Society Representatives, Dear Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today we are speaking on behalf of civil society organizations in the West Asia and Middle East Region. The Iran CSOs Training and Research Center (ICTRC), which is the WSIS Regional Civil Society Focal Point for the Middle and West Asia region, organized the 2nd Civil Society Regional Forum on the Information Society for the Middle East and West Asia, on August 23-25, 2005 in Kish Island, Iran. The Forum was intended to provide an opportunity for civil society representatives to discuss the WSIS process; network, share and exchange experience and technical know-how on ICT for development; receive much needed training and capacity building in ICT related areas; and draft a statement which could be presented at the WSIS in Tunisia in November. The Forum was organized in partnership with the United Nations, the World Bank, UNESCO, the Iranian National Commission for UNESCO, Hivos, and Internews Europe. Unfortunately and despite coordination at the local and national levels, the event was banned by local Kish Island authorities at the last minute. The banning of this event is of particular significance and concern to the region, as civil society organizations, especially independent organizations, from the West Asia and Middle East Region, due to a variety of factors, has had a minimal presence within the WSIS process and prep-com events. We had hoped that the Kish regional meeting would serve as a stepping stone through which we could work towards an increased, active and effective participation of civil society in the WSIS process.

Statements protesting the banning of the Kish Regional CSO Forum were issued by the International participants as well as the Iranian participants. The ICTRC also wrote letters to the Iranian authorities inquiring about the reasoning behind the banning of the event. The office of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran was also contacted. They followed up on the inquiry of the ICTRC by writing a letter to local Kish Island authorities asking for an explanation. We see the follow-up of the office of the President as a positive step in resolving this matter.

The banning of this regional event was also brought up during the WSIS prep-com 3 in Geneva in September, at multiple levels, including through the Civil Society Bureau of the WSIS. The President of the Prep-Com Mr. Karklins wrote a letter to the Iranian Representative at the UN in Geneva inquiring about the reason for banning of the Kish Forum. Despite intensive negotiations and discussion at the Geneva Prep-Com 3 between ICTRC representatives and the delegation of the Iranian government, to date, no official explanation has been given for the banning of the Forum.

ICTRC has also contacted the office of the President of the Islamic Republic of Iran, but no explanation has been offered through this office either.

Dear Madam President, Honorable Delegates, Civil Society Representatives, Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, in light of the fact that the WSIS and governments, including the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran, remain committed to the participation of all stakeholders in the implementation of the WSIS Declaration, and given the important role that civil society has in the implementation of the WSIS Declaration and its Action Plan, we ask once again that the WSIS Secretariat take the following actions:

1. We ask the WSIS Secretariat to follow-up with the Iranian authorities to inquire about the reasons for the banning of the 2nd Civil Society Regional Forum on the Information Society for the West Asia and Middle East Region on August 23-25, 2005 in Kish Island, Iran and ask the Iranian authorities to provide the WSIS secretariat an official explanation in writing.
2. We ask the WSIS Secretariat to request that the Iranian Authorities remedy this mistake by allowing for another regional forum to take place in Iran and facilitating the process through the issuance of visas and financial payment for damages incurred by the organizers, as it will be difficult to receive duplicate funds for such an event.
3. We ask the WSIS Secretariat to make a strong statement in support of the role of civil society in the WSIS process and to specifically make commitments to facilitate and increase the participation of civil society actors from the region in future WSIS events and in implementing the WSIS Declaration and Action Plan.

Specifically:

- a. We ask that greater financial and technical support be provided to organizations engaged in ICT and information society activities, with special emphasis on the West Asia and Middle East region.
- b. We also ask that the Multi-stakeholder Alliance charged with following up the WSIS process reflect a fair gender balance and a fair regional balance, but especially that it includes independent, non-governmental civil society organizations from the West Asia and Middle East region.
- c. We strongly urge the United Nations to reform its ECOSOC Accreditation process to allow for a real representation of independent non-governmental civil society organizations and actors from the West Asia and Middle East region at the WSIS and other UN Sponsored events. Otherwise, the true voice of independent civil society, which in this region tends to be fragile, emerging, and often newly established, will be excluded from international forums. Along these lines, we strongly encourage the UN, in light of its commitment to civil society, to establish an independent structure, comprised of independent non-governmental civil society organizations themselves, which would be charged with oversight and administration of ECOSOC accreditation of civil society organizations.
- d. We also strongly urge the WSIS Secretariat and the Multi-stakeholder Alliance charged with following up the WSIS process to vigorously monitor governments who

are signatories to the WSIS Declaration and Action Plan in their efforts to include all stakeholders in the implementation process and in living up to their commitments. Of particular concern for the West Asia and Middle East region is the issue of access to information. The problem of filtering has in fact become a major issue of concern for citizens and civil society organizations in many of the countries in the West Asia and Middle East region despite governmental commitments to the WSIS Declaration and Action Plan which specifically emphasizes access to information as a priority area. Governments which are signatories to the WSIS Declaration and Action Plan should be held accountable on this issue in particular.

4. In light of constraints placed on free speech and freedom of assembly in many of the countries which have made commitments to implementing the WSIS Declaration and Action Plan, we strongly urge the WSIS Secretariat and the multi-stakeholder Alliance charged with following up the WSIS Process, to adopt, the framework of Article 19 as the guiding principle of for the WSIS Declaration, guaranteeing free speech and freedom of assembly for civil society organizations in general, but especially those working on the information society.

Dear Madam President, Dear Honorable Delegates, Dear Civil Society Representatives, Dear Ladies and Gentlemen, Dear WSIS Secretariat, in conclusion we would like to thank you for the opportunity to speak here today. We hope that today you will take seriously your mandate, and that you will consider the voice of civil society in the WSIS process, especially the voice of independent civil society from the West Asia and Middle East Region, which has unfortunately been largely excluded from this process, and take concrete action on our suggestions within the WSIS process and within the UN structure.

Thank you once again.