

October 1, 2005

Dear Secretary General,

We civil society organizations participating at the Prepcom 3 of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) in Geneva (17 – 30 September 2005) express our deep concern about the conditions in which the WSIS is about to take place in Tunis from 16 – 18 November 2005. Since we learned that the second phase of the Summit would take place in Tunisia, we have expressed serious concerns over the violations of human rights and fundamental freedoms by the Tunisian authorities. Today, shortly before the holding of the Summit, we unfortunately must note that there has been no improvement and that we have recently even witnessed a serious deterioration of fundamental freedoms as follows:

The harassment of the Association of Tunisian Judges and the disciplinary sanctions taken against its active members on 1st August; the prohibition of the holding of the founding congress of the Union of Tunisian Journalists on September 7th and the harassment of its members; the prohibition of the holding of the 6th congress of the Tunisian Human Rights League on September 9th and the police blocks of its local sections.

These new attacks come in an already alarming context regarding such threats to fundamental freedoms as:

- Assaults on the Tunisian Bar that have included physical aggressions of lawyers at the law court and the sentencing of lawyer Mohamed Abbou in June 2005 to three years imprisonment - after an unfair trial – after he published on the Internet an article criticizing conditions in Tunisian prisons;
- Denial of the right to legal accreditation of independent civil society associations;
- Threats against freedom of assembly;
- Police blocking of the approaches to association headquarters and homes of their leaders;
- Verbal and physical aggressions of human rights defenders and public defamation campaigns against them;
- Retaliations against publicly independent university professors;
- Systematic censorship of newspapers and books;
- Blocking of Internet sites, systematic surveillance of e-mails and telephones;
- Arbitrary denial of authorizations to publish new newspapers and magazines and to create independent broadcasting outlets;
- Lack of a published and transparent system of broadcast licensing;
- Systematic use of torture by police to obtain confessions;
- Use of the pretext of the fight against terrorism to sentence without proof young people following trials international observers have deemed unfair;
- Keeping in jail of more than 600 prisoners of opinion, inhumane and degrading conditions and harassment of those who have finished their prison terms by imposing administrative controls, including banishment to distant locations.

These systematic violations of fundamental freedoms, coupled with the serious dysfunctioning of the judicial system have undermined the rule of law in Tunisia. It is shocking for the Summit to take place in a country with such a deplorable record.

We recall that the participants in the first phase of the WSIS have reaffirmed in their Geneva Declaration of December 2003 the centrality of human rights for the Information Society, most particularly:

- “The universality, indivisibility and interdependence and interrelation of all human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development as enshrined in the Vienna Declaration, as well as tight links between them. We reaffirm also that democracy, sustainable development and the respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as good governance at all levels are interdependent and mutually reinforcing” (§3)
- “That as the essential foundation of the information society and as outlined in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; that this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers” (§4)

We regret that the Tunisian government has not respected its commitments to this Declaration in its capacity of host country of the second phase of the WSIS and that it is jeopardizing the chances of success of this Summit by a deliberate policy of massive human rights violations.

We hence consider that the minimal conditions for the holding of this Summit are not met and that the credibility of the United Nations is at stake, as well as that of the international community, not to legitimize practices and policies contrary to its international commitments.

We regret to inform you that if there are no significant improvements in the human rights situation in Tunisia before November 16, we would then need to reconsider the modalities and level of our participation at this Summit.

We, therefore, respectfully request you to dispatch a high representative to Tunisia to review the state of affairs in the host country and for you subsequently to seek Tunisian official conformity with its international human rights commitments.

We look forward to your early reply.

Steve Buckley, President, World Association of Community Radio Broadcasting (AMARC)
E. Markham Bench, Executive Director, World Press Freedom Committee (WPFC)
Chantal Peyer, Co-President of the Swiss Plate-form on the Information Society (Comunica-
ch)

On behalf of the following international civil society entities:

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Sean O Siochru, Campaign for Communication Rights in the Information Society (CRIS)
Karen Banks, Association for Progressive Communication (APC)
Sidi Kaba, President, Federation International des Droits de l’Homme (FIDH).
Aidan White, General Secretary, International Federation of Journalists (IFJ)

Alexis Krikorian, International Publishers Association (IPA)
Guillaume Chenevière, Chairman, World Radio and Television Council
Jim Ottaway, Jr., Chairman and Mark Bench, Executive Director, World Press Freedom Committee (WPFC)
Timothy Balding, World Association of Newspapers (WAN)
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Susana Fernandez for WSIS Gender Caucus
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Karin Karlekar, Freedom House
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Randy Naylor, General Secretary, World Association of Christian Communications (WACC)
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Joanna Arevalo, Third World Majority (TWM)
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Lisa McLaughlin, on behalf of Union for Democratic Communications
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Radhia Nasraoui, president, Association de Lutte contre la Torture en Tunisie (ALTT)
Lotfi Hajji, president, Syndicat des journalistes tunisiens (SJT)
Naziha Rjiba, deputy president, Observatoire pour la Liberté de Presse, d'Edition et de Création (OLPEC)
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Safwa Aissa, president, Vérité-Action (VA)
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