

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**UN Human Rights Council Membership Must be Earned by Upholding Highest Standards: Clean Slates Permitted Empty Pledges by Asian States**

(Geneva/Bangkok, 13 November 2012) - Yesterday's elections of members to the Human Rights Council by the United Nations General Assembly in New York has demonstrated the unfortunate continuation of reproachful practices in electing Asian member States to the UN's principal body which is responsible for promoting universal respect for the protection of human rights, as only 5 candidates were put forward to fill the 5 vacant seats for the Asia group. *"The clean-slate practice has become the rule rather than the exception. We reiterate time and again that it is contrary to the spirit of competitive elections and undermines any genuine opportunity for the UN General Assembly to select Council members based on their demonstrated commitment to uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights"*, stated Yap Swee Seng, executive director of Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA), a regional human rights organization representing 49 non-governmental organizations across Asia.

Japan, Pakistan and South Korea have garnered membership at the Council for 2013-2015, which has followed from their most recent Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Working Group sessions of 22 October-5 November 2012. *"Civil society expects governments to engage in open and inclusive consultative processes with stakeholders, not just during the UPR, but also in the process of drafting their voluntary pledges when seeking Council membership. Furthermore, pledges and commitments made to the Council on international contributions to human rights should be based on structured and principled positions which are inclusive of the views and expectations of civil society"*, stressed Kazuko Ito, secretary-general of Human Rights Now (HRN), Japan.

Civil society in South Korea also expressed their deep disappointment with their government's responses during the recent UPR, in which the government presented a skewed view of the implementation of its human rights obligations¹. *"The voluntary pledges made by the government for the Council membership are as hollow as those presented during the UPR. The government must take further efforts to ensure realistic, measureable and time-bound concrete action points which streamline recommendations from various UN human rights mechanisms"*, urged Taeho Lee, secretary-general of People's Solidarity for Participatory Democracy (PSPD), South Korea.

Pakistan outlined in its voluntary pledges as well as during its UPR, the influential role it has played at the Council, particularly as the coordinator of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). *"Pakistan's redirection at the Council towards forging consensus on contentious issues such as the incitement to hatred and the right to freedom of expression must be strengthened further through principled approaches that do not undermine existing universal human right norms and standards. Such developments at the Council should also be applied at the national level, particularly as the government is increasingly adopting a strategy of digital censorship and surveillance in the name of safeguarding national security, religious values and morality"*², expressed Shahzad Ahmad, country director of Bytes for All, Pakistan.

¹ Korean NGO Coalition for the 2nd Cycle of the UPR on the Republic of Korea, "Republic of Korea: Need to Show More Commitment to Improve Its Human Rights", 31 October 2012, <http://www.peoplepower21.org/English/965602>

² Bytes for All Pakistan, "A New Wave of Surveillance in Pakistan", 30 October 2012, <http://content.bytesforall.pk/node/74>

Meanwhile, highlighting the joint letter of 35 human rights organizations dated 9 November 2012,³ which was addressed to all candidates of the 12 November elections to the Council membership, FORUM-ASIA once more urged that member States of the Council fully cooperate with the UN human rights mechanisms, particularly Special Procedures, and ensure free and safe engagement of all human rights defenders and NGOs with these mechanisms without the fear of reprisals. [END]

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Notes to editors:

- Member States of the UN Human Rights Council are elected directly and individually by secret ballot by the majority of the members of the UN General Assembly. The 47 seats to the Council are distributed as follows among regional groups: Asian States (13); African States (13); Latin American and Caribbean States (8); Eastern European States (6); and Western European and other States (7). The members of the Council serve for a period of three years and shall not be eligible for immediate re-election after two consecutive terms.
- The elections for 18 new members, including 5 Asian States, to the Council membership for 2013-2015 took place in New York yesterday on 12 November 2012. With the yesterday's election results - United Arab Emirates (184 votes), Kazakhstan (183 votes), Japan (182 votes), Republic of Korea (176 votes) and Pakistan (171 votes), Asian member States sitting in the Council from 1 January 2013 will be India, Indonesia, Japan, Kazakhstan, Kuwait, Malaysia, the Maldives, Pakistan, the Philippines, South Korea, Qatar, Thailand and the United Arab Emirates.
- When electing members of the Council, the UN General Assembly shall take into account the contribution of candidates to the promotion and protection of human rights and their voluntary pledges and commitments made thereto. For five out of the seven elections since 2006, however, Asian States have attempted to put forward "clean slates" thereby nullifying the spirit of the competitive elections. The pledges made by Asian candidate States for the yesterday's elections are available at:

Japan, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/67/76

Kazakhstan, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/67/122

Pakistan, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/67/486

Republic of Korea, http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/67/355

United Arab Emirates http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/67/85

³ Joint NGO Letter to Candidates to the Human Rights Council (on the Cooperation with Special Procedures and the Acts of Reprisals), 9 November 2012, <http://www.forum-asia.org/?p=15583>