



**Intervention by Shri Rao Inderjit Singh, Minister of State for External Affairs
on 'The State of Democracy in Asia-Oceania at the Third Ministerial Meeting
of the Community of Democracies in Santiago, Chile on April 29, 2005
(1500-1800 hrs)**

Democracy, as a political framework, continues to remain unrivalled. It is indeed the only basis, as we know today, of a just and civilized society, international stability, development and peace. The recent Tsunami tragedy in our own region once again demonstrated visibly that democracies are obligated to be responsive and accountable to their people, in times of crisis, in a way that an authoritarian regime would not be. It is therefore a matter of immense satisfaction that there has been a growing momentum towards democratization in the world, including in our own region. To quote only a few recent examples, the successful adoption of a Constitution and holding of Presidential elections amidst daunting challenges in Afghanistan, demonstrated not only the courage of the Afghan people, but also the keen desire for freedom and democracy of oppressed people, everywhere. Similarly, the world has welcomed the election of a transitional Government in Iraq and is looking forward to the establishment of a constitutionally elected permanent Iraqi Government by the end of the year. In Timor Leste, turmoil has given way to stability and the transition to independence and self-governance is well on its way. For its part, India has been contributing extensively towards consolidating the process of democratic transition in Afghanistan, including by committing \$ 500 million towards its reconstruction. Similarly, we have committed \$ 30 million for Iraqi reconstruction and have offered electoral assistance and training to Iraq.

Unfortunately, there are still some centres where military dictatorship and authoritarian rule continue to hold sway in our own region. There have also been regrettable setbacks. India is deeply concerned about the dismissal of the multiparty government and imposition of emergency in Nepal on 1 February 2005. We firmly believe that the challenges being faced by Nepal can be addressed effectively only on the basis of a national consensus between the two constitutional forces, namely, the political parties and the constitutional monarchy. India joins the international community in calling upon His

Majesty's Government of Nepal for an early restoration of multi-party democracy.

Though our situations are different in terms of historical legacy and contemporary reality, the countries of the region share common challenges and concerns. In particular, the danger posed by state-sponsored, cross-border and other forms of terrorism is a major challenge to our shared democratic values and to the existence of democracy itself. The event since 11 September, 2001 and the targeting of open societies like India, Indonesia and Sri Lanka, have shown that democracies are particularly vulnerable to terrorist attacks because terrorism exploits the strength of democracies - the protection of human rights, freedom of expression, movement etc. - and converts them into weaknesses. Democracy in the Asia-Oceania region would be severely hampered unless it is free from terrorism, extremism and other threats. Freedom of speech cannot flow from the barrel of a gun; democracy cannot be nurtured in an environment that negates the basis of democracy and human rights.

No democracy is ideal. The environment in which a democracy exists is constantly evolving, requiring a system that is flexible, yet resilient. Sharing our experiences offers the best way to realize the goal of our community to help emerging democracies improve their own systems and processes. In this context, lessons learned from India's own democratic experience, going back to over 3,000 years ago, may be relevant. India's unique experiment with Panchayat Raj, where major financial and administrative powers have been delegated to the elected bodies at the village and town level has empowered people and made the concept of 'grassroots democracy' a reality. The inclusiveness of Indian democracy in a complex multi-ethnic and multi-religious society, where minorities, whether linguistic or religious, enthusiastically participate in elections, and feel an inherent part of the democratic enterprise, could be usefully simulated in welding pluralistic societies elsewhere.

Apart from the support of fellow democratic nations, the international community and forums like this Community in particular, are critical in facilitating and providing sustained support to challenging transitions towards democracy. India sees a significant role for the Community of Democracies in this regard through dialogue and cooperation, in a spirit of mutual respect and equality.

India has always been deeply wedded to the ideals and the spirit of democracy, and welcomes, in all humility, an opportunity to share its long experience with democracy.

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