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Statement of the Government of Taiwan, Republic of China

Protection and promotion of human rights in Taiwan: current situation and future prospects

Chairman; distinguished guests; ladies and gentlemen:

I am truly honoured to participate in the 10th annual meeting of the Asia Pacific Forum of National Human Rights Institution (APF). I hope that my short remarks will enhance your understanding of our government's efforts in improving human rights in Taiwan and in Asia.

In his inaugural speech in 2000, President Chen Shui-bian proposed the vision of "establishing the country on the foundation of human rights". Other than continuing to investigate the large-scale suppression of human rights during the White Terror Era and the Martial Law in Taiwan, the government is making every effort to promote human rights education, establish a national human rights commission, and speed up the incorporation in our laws of the International Human Rights Bill.

Over the past five years, Taiwan has promoted the production of human rights reports by all executive branches of government, announced the national human rights policy white paper, and gradually began to abolish the death penalty. Some of our main recent achievements are as follows:

To prevent police torture of suspects, the rules imposed on police departments to make them abide by the Criminal Procedures Law during investigations have been strengthened, requiring the videotaping of depositions to avoid torture.

Second, in terms of human rights education, our government's major tasks are: (1) making the promotion of human rights education and research a key function of the National Human Rights Commission; (2) establishing a human rights committee in the Ministry of Education responsible for education on human rights and the rule of law at school, including introducing human rights lessons in elementary and junior high schools texts to cultivate human rights knowledge from childhood, and providing human rights lessons in teacher-training programs; (3) encouraging universities to set up human rights research centres; (4) subsidising private groups to hold human rights training and conferences; (5) and establishing human rights databanks and websites.

Currently, there are around 360,000 foreign labourers in Taiwan. Our local governments have established 24 counselling service centres to provide them with psychological and legal counselling and help settle disputes with employers. The rules governing change of employers have also been relaxed, allowing them to change employers freely, up to three times. When changing employers, employers can now choose foreign labourers and vice versa. This is a further step in safeguarding the rights of foreign labourers.

There is still a long way to go. For example, the legislative bill to establish the National Human Rights Commission was sent to the opposition dominated Legislature for consideration in 2002, but it stalled its revision. In addition, ratification of the ICCPR and the ICESCR is pending due to a disagreement. Still, incorporating the International Human Rights Bill in our domestic laws remains our goal, and the government of Taiwan has made due reference to these instruments in drafting our basic Human Rights Law, which has been reviewed by international law scholars and the International Commission of Jurists (ICJ). When the draft is finalized, it will be sent to the Legislature for review.

Also in order to strengthen basic human rights and social justice, we are promoting constitutional reform in various stages. The second phase that will start next year will comprise (1) including three rights of labourers (union right, group negotiation right and strike right) to the list of human rights in the Constitution; (2) adding a chapter on indigenous people in the Constitution; (3) lowering the voting age to 18 years old; and (4) promoting the inclusion of the National Human Rights Commission in the Constitution.

As many of you know, Taiwan has established the Taiwan Foundation for Democracy (TFD), the first national democracy assistance foundation in Asia. This year it has sponsored the setting up of the World Forum for Democratisation in Asia (WFDA), which has become sort of a key platform network of democracy networks in the region. WFDA held three international workshops in different countries where various key human and political rights issues were addressed, and for which plans of collective action were generated. The TFD has also co-sponsored with Vital Voices a women's leadership program to combat violence against women that was held in January in Cambodia; is sponsoring a regional working meeting of the international human rights cities network to be held in Taiwan; and organizing and sponsoring an international human rights instruments workshop with NGOs from other countries.

After long-term rule under Marshall Law, the implementation of human rights and democracy was sure to be difficult. However, our hard work to strengthen our young democracy's human rights foundation remind the world that although Taiwan is unjustly isolated from the international community, we have never stopped promoting democracy and human rights. Taiwan will always be a member of the global human rights village. Thank you! Your precious comments are most welcome.