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NGO COMMITTEE RECOMMENDS SIX ORGANIZATIONS FOR CONSULTATIVE STATUS WITH ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL, CONCLUDES CURRENT SESSION

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The United Nations issued the following press release:

Wrapping up its current session, the Committee on Non-Governmental Organizations today decided to recommend six non-governmental organizations (NGOs) for consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, and decided to recommend withdrawal of status for the Islamic African Relief Agency, a Sudan-based NGO claiming to provide assistance to disadvantaged populations worldwide.

As a standing committee of the Council, the panel uses various criteria to recommend general, special or roster status with the Economic and Social Council, including the applicant's mandate, governance and financial regime. Organizations that have general and special consultative status can attend meetings of the Council and circulate statements of a certain length. Those with general status can, in addition, speak at meetings and propose items for the Council's agenda, while NGOs with roster status can only attend meetings.

Telling the Committee that it should be proud of the work it had accomplished over the past week, Chairperson Beatriz Londoño of Colombia said that of the 146 applications under review, including those deferred from previous sessions since 1999, the panel had recommended consultative status for 97 NGOs and deferred consideration of 42 applications to a later date.

A key decision today - and point of debate - was the recommendation on withdrawal of status for the Islamic African Relief Agency, an NGO headquartered in Khartoum. Earlier in the week, the Committee had tried to contact the group after the representative of the United States had called for withdrawal of its consultative status. He informed delegations that since 2004, the NGO had been placed on the list of terrorist organizations by the United States Treasury Department, because of its links with Al-Qaida and terrorist financing activities.

He added at the time that several associates of the NGO appeared on the Consolidated List maintained by the Security Council's Al-Qaida and Taliban Sanctions Committee. He urged the Committee on NGOs to take a decision before the end of the current session.

Today, he informed the Committee that the United States delegation had sent representatives to the actual physical address on the ground in the Sudan provided by the Agency and the group had apparently moved. Was the Committee to wait years for a reply? It was neither the United States' nor any delegation's responsibility to search the globe to

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determine where this group had moved or why it had refused to answer the Committee's questions.

Cuba cautioned against moving so quickly, however, saying that while he was certain that the information presented by the United States about the Islamic African Relief Agency was true, the Cuban delegation would have preferred to give a little more time to receive answer, since the accusations levelled against the group had been quite serious. His statement touched purely on procedural matters, he added. Germany's representative said, however, that the Committee's work could not be undercut by any organization that did not reply to questions. If the NGO had moved, it had certainly had time to get its answers back to the NGO Section.

When the Committee took up new applications, it recommended special status to:

- Geneva Call, a two-year old organization working to encourage non-State actors to accept international humanitarian norms, in particular, to stop using anti-personnel landmines. The group's ultimate aim is to enhance the rights of victims of armed conflict.

- Vital Voices Global Partnership, a non-profit, Washington-based NGO founded in 1999 with the aim of improving the economic, social and political status of women worldwide.

- **Biopolitics International Organisation** (B.I.O), a 20-year-old international organization based in Athens, which aims to promote environmental awareness-raising, ways to use the environment as a vehicle to promote peace, and, among other things, to ensure the fundamental human right to live in a clean environment.

- Group of 78, an NGO founded in 1980 by "78 outstanding Canadians" with the aim of promoting global peace and security through the removal of the threat of nuclear war and the establishment of enduring peace and human security.

- Global Village for Rehabilitation and Development, a decade-old national organization based in India, dealing with, among other things, children's outreach, promoting and protecting the rights of rural women, orphans, and other children in difficult circumstances, and ensuring emergency services reached tribal populations in remote areas in the wake of natural disasters.

Turning next to application that had been deferred from previous sessions, the Committee decided to recommend special status to China Association for International Science and Technology Cooperation, a Beijing-based NGO founded in 1992 to promote China's scientific and technical cooperation with other countries and regions.

In other action, the Committee took note of the quadrennial report of the World Trade Centre Association on its activities during the period 2001-2004.

Awaiting further explanations to its questions, the Committee deferred action on the report of the International Service for Human Rights, a Geneva-based international NGO promoting human rights and encouraging the work of human rights defenders.

The representative of the Russian Federation reiterated his earlier concerns about the NGO's true aims, particularly in light of its vague answers to the Committee's questions about its work. He stressed that the NGO had at one time entered into the domestic affairs of a sovereign nation and had held "secret" and "clandestine" meetings disguised as "courses" devoted to human rights. The representative of Cuba echoed Russia's wariness about the group's sketchy answers to the Committee's questions, and he urged the Chair to relay those concerns to the group, hoping to "get to the bottom" of what was really going on.

When the Committee took up documents related to its own work, Michele Federoff, of NGO Section of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, answered several questions on applications and the accreditation process that had arisen earlier in the session. She assured the Committee that the delays in the issuance of documents or transmittal of information did not mean that some NGOs were getting sidelined. The Section was actively working to

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surmount translation and distribution problems and other issues.

It was also working to give more chances for NGOs from the developing world to participate in the Committee's work, with an eye finding ways to overcome the vast differences in technological capacity between countries. She noted that if the Section transmitted questions to groups in the North, an answer was received usually within 48 hours. But because of problems with phone coverage, lack of e-mail service, or poor office equipment, questions posed to Southern NGOs sometimes went unanswered for weeks.

In other business, Committee Rapporteur Octavian Stamate of Romania presented the Committee's draft report (document E/C.2/2006/L.2), which contained the proceedings of the meetings that had been held during the past week. He urged delegations to speedily examine the document and return their comments as soon as possible so the document could be finalized.

Looking ahead to the Committee's May session, NGO Section Chief Hanifa Mezoui said that there may be more time then to devote to the panel's agenda item on strengthening of the NGO Section. She also looked forward to presenting a report on her sabbatical proposal on "The Development of New Academic Programmes for Achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) through the Partnership of the International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Other Institutions (AICESIS) and United Nations-NGO-IREN and Academia".

In her closing statement, Ms. Londo?o encouraged delegations to continue working in the constructive spirit that had characterized the current session, which opened on 19 January. She noted that Committee delegations were able to get through even the most contentious issues "with a smile", and thanked the NGO Section, interpreters, conference services personnel, press officers and sound engineer for ensuring a smooth session.

Thanks and appreciation were expressed by the representatives of: Pakistan (on behalf of the Asian Group); Turkey (on behalf of the Western European and Other Group); the United States; Cuba (on behalf of the Latin American and Caribbean Group); Zimbabwe (on behalf of the African Group); and Russian Federation (on behalf of the Eastern European Group).

The Committee on NGOs will resume its 2006 session at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 10 May.

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