

Remarks of Kenneth Wollack, NDI President
2008 NDI Democracy Luncheon

Washington, D.C.
December 15, 2008

Thank you, Christiane.

At NDI's inception, I don't think anyone could have anticipated how much the world would change –both for good and for ill. Fortunately, wherever we looked there were believers in the power for positive change.

Over the past 25 years, NDI staff and our volunteer political and civic practitioners from more than 100 countries have come together to share their knowledge—of political organizing, of civic participation, of building political parties and parliaments, of ensuring open elections and openness in government.

Fundamentally, our work is cooperative and international. It includes a growing number of governments, intergovernmental bodies, and other nongovernmental groups. We are, in fact, part of a global network that has come to understand by study and experience that democracy is inseparable from human development and dignity. President-elect Obama has spoken often about this connection. We support this ongoing democratic experiment not because it serves a narrow definition of U.S. security interests, although it does, but because it is simply the right thing to do.

In this regard, Archbishop Tutu would invoke the Zulu word ubuntu – that, “my humanity is bound up in yours.”

NDI is proud to be part of the National Endowment for Democracy, along with IRI, CIPE, and the Solidarity Center. We are proud to work alongside many others, some of whom are with us today – IFES, OSI, the UNDP, Freedom House, the OAS, the ABA, the World Bank, the Asia Foundation, Vital Voices, the German party foundations and the German Marshall Fund.

We are honored by the presence of members and staff of the US Congress, and the House Democracy Assistance Commission. They have been a source of support for democratic activists around the world, and for NDI.

We want to recognize USAID and the State Department, for their ongoing and growing support for democracy efforts in both Democratic and Republican Administrations.

At its heart NDI is a public/private partnership. So I especially want to single out those who made this event possible – the corporations, trade unions, foundations and individual donors listed in your program.

We warmly welcome the diplomats who have joined us from new, emerging, traditional and yes, yet to be democracies. I would also like to recognize the dedicated Board and talented staff of NDI who guide and carry out our work in more than 60 countries. This includes Vice President Shari Bryan who has ably succeeded Jean Dunn; Kristen Haffert who directs NDI's women's programs, and Piper, Veronica and Kate who all organized this gathering.

Finally, I would like to thank our Chairman, Madeleine Albright, who has provided extraordinary leadership to NDI, first as Vice Chairman 25 years ago and, since 2001, as Chairman. I often complain that she is not monogamous – that she does have other responsibilities, other interests outside NDI. We have reluctantly accepted the presence of these other suitors, knowing however, that we are still her first love.

We have learned a great deal over the past two and a half decades. Perhaps the most important lesson was articulated by former Polish Foreign Minister and Solidarity leader Bronislaw Geremek, who died tragically this past summer. He reminded us that “democracy is by no means a process that goes from triumph to triumph, nor is it exempt from creating the very conditions that undermine it.”

We have discovered, not surprisingly, that new democracies are fragile, having inherited serious problems such as debt, ethnic and religious divisions, disease, poverty and corruption. And unless these new democracies deliver tangible improvements in the lives of all their citizens, and not just the privileged few, the entire democratic system will be placed in jeopardy. For this reason, NDI has, in recent years, begun new initiatives in nearly two dozen countries. These include fostering sustained interactions between citizens and elected officials, and assisting political institutions to develop professional capacities to deal with quality of life issues – from transparency of extractive industry revenues and health care reform, to poverty reduction and the eradication of HIV/AIDS.

Helping new democracies deliver has become the next generation of challenges to democracy support efforts.

At the same time, this gathering and our Award recipients personify the hard reality that the struggle for even fundamental political and human rights goes on in many places against tremendous odds. This struggle draws strength and sustenance from international engagement and attention. And there are many individuals and organizations here today who are providing critical support in these places. The Women's League of Burma represents this struggle at the very grass roots; Archbishop Tutu has become the lode star

– whose voice has become an inspiration to those who are free and to those who are oppressed – from Burma to Sudan to Zimbabwe. Earlier this month, 112 former Presidents and Prime Ministers wrote to the UN Secretary General to demand the immediate release of 2,100 political prisoners in Burma. This initiative can be traced to Archbishop Tutu’s leadership, as well as similar efforts by his fellow Nobel Laureates and many others.

We are fortunate to honor the courage of the Women’s League and Archbishop Tutu and we thank all of you for joining us.

Now is the eating portion of the program.