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INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY DEMANDS END TO SECRECY IN TPPA TALKS

Negotiators in Santiago, Chile for the fifth round of Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) talks were delivered a forceful message today by prominent civil society groups, demanding an end to the secrecy that shields their negotiations from the scrutiny of national lawmakers and the general public.

Open letters addressed to government leaders in Australia, Chile, Malaysia, New Zealand and the United States of America, signed by trade unions, environmentalists, faith and social justice organisations that speak for hundreds of thousands of concerned citizens, were handed to each delegation.

The letters object that the proposed agreement is deeply undemocratic in its process and its effect.

Its rules are expected to restrict domestic policies and laws on areas as diverse as healthcare, energy, culture and financial stability for decades ahead, and would give major corporations enormous leverage over democratic processes, including the power to sue governments in international courts.

Despite these far-reaching implications, the negotiations take place behind closed doors. The secrecy far exceeds that of the World Trade Organisation and perhaps even the negotiations on the Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement, where governments agreed to release the texts after repeated leaks.

The call became more poignant as groups monitoring the talks announced they had obtained leaked copies of further negotiating texts on intellectual property tabled by several countries.

The open letters to governments call for negotiators to agree at Santiago to:

1. Create and maintain a public website on which governments and civil society can post information and participate as equals in a dialogue and debate;
2. Post the draft text of each chapter at the end of each round of negotiations to enable expert and public scrutiny. Given the global financial crisis, the perfect starting point is the texts on investment and financial services, completed in the December 2010 Auckland round;
3. Post countries' position papers on specific subjects that are tabled during negotiations;
4. Guarantee that all civil society has equal access to information and engagement with the process, regardless of whether they are private sector or public interest groups, supportive or critical of the proposed agreement.

To focus the challenge to the negotiators, independent experts have constructed mock texts of their own dealing with investment and financial services, based on existing free trade agreements among the parties. Analyses based on these mock texts were presented during "stakeholder" sessions on the second day of the Chile negotiations. Delegations were challenged to provide the real draft texts to enable more accurate and truly informed debate.

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