

Participation in the ITU Plenipotentiary meeting in Busan, South Korea, as a civil society participant of the Indian delegation - A short report

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The plenipotentiary meetings of ITU are its highest policy making body and has the power to amend ITU's Constitution and Convention. The 2014 Plenipotentiary (PP) meeting of ITU was held in Busan, South Korea, from 20th October to 7th November. After the highly controversial 2012 ITU meeting, the World Conference on International Telecommunication, where the issue of the role of ITU in governance of the Internet split the countries in an unprecedented manner, the ITU PP was awaited with considerable anticipation by many. The issue of the extent to which the ITU can get involved in Internet related matters was expected to come up again, and become a sticky issue.

Due to the expected importance of the PP meeting, I applied to the Department of Telecommunication to include me as a civil society member of the Indian delegation, which they they kindly did.

Since three weeks was too long a period to stay away from work, I decided to attend one full week and 4 days of the last week. I reached Busan on the 27th of October and left for India on the morning of the 7th of November, since the last day of the conference is mainly for ceremonial purposes.

I worked closely with the Indian delegation, especially its head, Shri Ram Narian, on various issues of interest to India. I also worked closely with civil society delegates at the meeting, both those from India and from other countries.

India took three specific resolution proposals to the meeting; (1) on Software Defined Networks, (2) regarding communication during disasters, and (3) exploring new ways to route, resolve addresses and trace traffic, with a view to ensuring a secure information society. The proposals (1) and (2) got an good and easy reception, and the concerns and views expressed therein were widely shared. A good part of these proposals got included in the final adopted text. The proposal 3 however was viewed as somewhat controversial, and having too far-reaching an impact on the manner that Internet addressing and routing systems work at present. Sensitive to these views, India re-presented the proposal seeking not immediate direct action but undertaking of studies on these areas by the ITU. Many delegates shared the concerns that were expressed in the India proposal and the need for taking some clear action on them. Others thought that this was too radical a proposal to rework the Internet's global architecture. However, for whatever reason, the new proposal by India was taken up too close to when the Working Group on Internet related issues had to close its discussions. In the circumstances, India agreed to not pursue the proposal under the condition that India's proposal will be noted in the minutes of the ITU PP along with a note that it could not be pursued due to paucity of time and that the delegates welcome its future consideration at different forums, including the ITU. India also made a full statement on the issue which was included in the minutes, which spoke of need for fairness and equity in global distribution and management of Internet related resources. In sum, it can be said that India was able to put forward its concerns on the table which were noted by all, and specifically supported by many. This gives India the opportunity to both to modify its proposal, as necessary, as per the feedback received, and pursue its genuine concern within ITU's various bodies as well as other forums that are suitable for this purpose. It also gave India a good profile at the meeting for bringing forward a concrete and specific proposal. I worked closely with the Indian delegation during all the activities around this proposal. In the end, the outcome was noted with satisfaction by the Indian delegation, as well as civil society members from India present at Busan.

I also worked closely with civil society groups present in Busan. Their main concern revolved around getting free and open access to ITU documents and improved participation of civil society in ITU's processes. Letters were written to the ITU management in this regard and meetings held. I participated in the civil society meeting with the ITU Secretary General, and another one with the Designated Secretary General. Some documents were opened to the public even during the PP meeting, and a specific decision was also taken at the meeting to keep all documents other than those under negotiations open to the public. Another significant decision from the civil society point of view was the decision that the Council Working Group on International Internet-Related Public Policy Issues will have open consultations (with remote participation) before each of its meetings.

All in all, it can be said that the ITU PP 2014 meeting was a very significant one in ITU's history. After the WCIT fiasco of 2012, there was much apprehension about the ITU's future. It can safely be said that the ITU emerged stronger from the PP meeting, and re-established itself as an important global governance institution that was here to stay, and serve very important public interest purposes. In fact, the background of the WCIT worked well for the success of the ITU PP. Everyone was extremely cautious and careful to not stoke passions too much on either side. Countries no doubt pushed their interests and agendas but were careful to negotiate and accept middle grounds wherever possible. The ITU management was also extremely careful and handled all controversial issues very dexterously. In fact, it turned out to be the most well-run PP meeting in a long time, with not a single issue put to vote which was a first for an ITU PP. More or less, all substantial work was completed by the end of the second weekend itself, which left the last week rather relaxed for delegates to tie together a very few, relatively minor, left over issues. It was already agreed informally among the key countries not to seek any amendments to the ITU Constitution or Convention. In a similar vein, after a short struggle, delegates agreed not to define 'ICTs' during this PP meeting. It is important to mention here that many ITU texts currently speak of 'telecom/ ICTs'. Trying to define 'ICTs' would have taken the meeting into a difficult terrain.

On the key matter of Internet related issues, the final texts more or less repeat what was said in the last PP, and this leaves a lot of important Internet related issues open for consideration by various bodies of the ITU. In some areas, there was even some strengthening with regard to the Internet related remit of ITU. At the same time, that status quo was able to be protected with regard to the issues that are already being comprehensively dealt with elsewhere. In sum, it was about the best outcome that could have been expected. ITU came off as a strong and abiding global governance organization. Apart from strengthening its traditional remit, and adding new areas like tracking airplanes (in light of the Malaysian air tragedy) and better preparedness and role in Ebola kind of health emergencies, some very important Internet related issues remain open for it to address, as and when required. It is very important that there are adequate spaces and possibilities of addressing the almost endless public policy issues that will be thrown up as ICTs become an increasingly central element of our social systems.

At least some of the issues that surfaced at the PP will be taken to WSIS plus 10 review next year, and in that sense as well attendance at the meeting was very useful.