

THE NATIONAL LAW JOURNAL

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THE WEEKLY NEWSPAPER FOR THE LEGAL PROFESSION

MONDAY, APRIL 21, 2008

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OPINION

■ ADVANCING THE RULE OF LAW

World Justice Forum

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IMAGINE, FOR a minute, how much our world would change if we did not have access to impartial courts to resolve disputes, if police could not be trusted to fairly enforce the law and if statutes protecting the environment and human safety could be ignored with impunity. Unfortunately, many Americans and citizens of other nations do not have to imagine such bitter scenarios at all. They are a part of daily experience in communities where the rule of law has broken down. Despite good intentions, efforts to advance health, safety and economic opportunity in such settings are routinely thwarted.

In July, leaders of widely diverse professions, from nations on every continent, will gather in Vienna, Austria, with a shared belief: We will all gain by strengthening the rule of law. The World Justice Forum, which will take place from July 2 to 5, is striking not just for the ambition of its agenda, but for who will be attending, and which organizations will be sharing in the sponsorship.

The forum is engaging stakeholders from across civil society. In addition to judges and lawyers, it is actively

engaging leaders in such disciplines as architecture, arts, business, education, engineering, environment, faith, human rights, labor, law enforcement, media, military, public health and public safety.

Its sponsors include the World Federation of Public Health Associations, the U.S. and International Chambers of Commerce, the International Trade Union Confederation, the Association of International Educators and the American Society of Civil Engineers.

Many professions, one goal

The goal of the forum is to forge these elements into an ongoing World Justice Project, which will seek to make advancing the rule of law a mainstream goal of all major professions and disciplines.

Is it significant that such divergent organizations are joining lawyers and judges in focusing on the rule of law? And can nonlawyer groups make significant contributions in advancing the rule of law in the United States and other nations?

Emphatically, the answer is “yes.”

As defined by the World Justice Project, the rule of law is of prime importance

to virtually everyone. It is the foundation for communities of opportunity and equity, and it is best advanced by a multidisciplinary movement.

The rule of law is based on four universal principles: The government and its agents are accountable to the law; laws are clear, stable and fair, and protect fundamental rights, including property and personal security; laws are enacted and enforced through an accessible, fair and efficient process; and laws are upheld, and access to justice is provided, by competent, ethical and independent enforcement officers, lawyers and judges.

Experience shows these conditions correlate closely to political and economic freedom. They also directly support such essential needs as health, education, physical security and basic human rights. And, importantly, they are universal, not related to any one nation's values or legal tradition.

The significance of these ideas is profound. As leaders try to solve such diverse problems as hunger, terrorism, corruption and the growing threat of health pandemics, it is hard to imagine significant progress without a fundamental improvement in institutions of

law and justice. Critical as these goals are, lawyers and judges cannot achieve them alone. When society works together to achieve the rule of law, it can become a compelling force for change. In recent years, we have seen examples of this here and abroad.

When most members of Pakistan's Supreme Court, dozens of other judges and thousands of lawyers were jailed last year as part of a state of emergency declared by Pakistani leader Pervez Musharraf, it appeared to be a discouraging dissolution of that nation's institutions of law. Instead, we saw Pakistani civil society band together, supported by lawyers and other groups around the world. They rallied around ideas central to the rule of law, such as protecting the judiciary from political manipulation and pressure. While

the drama in Pakistan continues, the release of all jailed judges last month marks a tremendous step forward.

In our own country, lawyers and business groups worked together in South Dakota in 2006 to defeat an initiative that would have exposed judges to lawsuits and even jail for performing their official duties. Business leaders saw that they would suffer if impartial state courts were destabilized by this woefully misguided measure.

While Americans celebrate their independence here at home, scholars in Vienna will debate the impact of rule of law on other human needs, new rule of law projects will be incubated and leaders of major disciplines in many nations will chart plans for the future. It is the vision of the World Justice Project that multidisciplinary

coalitions for justice will become the norm—that doctors, lawyers, educators, engineers and clergy, for instance, can work together in common cause. And that these efforts will reinforce for entire societies the value of justice and the rule of law, and the need for both if we are to survive and prosper. **NLJ**

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