

Your Excellency Prime Minister Ts. Elbegdorj,

Since the commencement of democratic reforms, Mongolia moved decisively towards an open society, assuring protection of political rights and civil liberties and encouraging citizen participation in the political process. Mongolia's reforms have been welcomed by the international community and its achievements have been acknowledged by governmental and non-governmental organizations both in Mongolia and overseas. At the same time, Mongolian democratic reforms failed to assure the right of the public's access to information.

As scholars, historians and public activists we are deeply concerned by the obstacles to archival research in Mongolia. Access to government-held records is obstructed by the bureaucratic inertia and draconian state secrets legislation. Archival documents 40, 50, 60 years old are not available to researchers on the ground of their "secrecy".

It is expedient and rational to limit public access to sensitive documents pertaining to the State's current domestic and foreign policies. But in most democratic countries government-held records are released to the public in accordance with the "30 year rule". Documents older than 30 years, whatever their original secrecy or importance, are declassified and made available to the public.

The idea behind systematic declassification of documents is that the people, and not the government, own the state records; the government is a temporary *guardian* of records, but eventually all policy documents, including documents on foreign affairs, should become a part of the public domain. In most Eastern European countries, government records up to 1990 have been declassified. Foreign policy documents are available to scholars in Russia, across much of Central Asia and even in China. Mongolia unfortunately lags behind in this important sphere.

As a result, Mongolian history is being written on the basis of non-Mongolian sources. There are very few books on Mongolia's recent history; and they almost never rely on the Mongolian documents. In the meantime, a vast amount of extremely important documents, which would change not only our understanding of Mongolian but of international history, are permitted to decay in dust in the depositories of the Mongolian archives.

The opening of the Mongolian archives would certainly encourage research by both Mongolian and foreign scholars on this country's history and help illuminate her role in the international affairs. Scholarly research would bring about greater international collaboration between Mongolian and foreign academics and stimulate the public interest in Mongolia in this country and overseas. Continuing secrecy of archival records will do injustice to Mongolia's history and undermine scholarly work.

On the other hand, lack of access to historical records is a specific indication of the Mongolian Government's unwillingness to promote reform in the sphere of access to information, despite the expressed commitments to the contrary.

The Mongolian government has repeatedly pledged itself to transparency and openness. During a recent International Conference on New and Restored Democracies, Mongolia became a party to the Ulaanbaatar Declaration, expressing support for "an open and transparent society [which] encourages the free creation, pursuit and flow of information." The Action Plan of the Mongolian government (2004-2008) contains a commitment to "provide the citizens with rights to access any information".

We welcome this commitment to openness, and hope that it will be matched by actual steps in the direction of opening up the state archives to scholarly research. We sincerely hope that you will act promptly and effectively to assure the fullest, fairest, and freest possible opening of Mongolian communist-era historical archives, a development, which would serve as strong evidence of the country's progress toward democracy, and allow Mongolia to take its rightful place in the international history.

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