

For immediate release
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PRESS RELEASE

Human Rights Organizations Urge Secretary Rice to Support Latest Proposal for New UN Human Rights Council

February 23, 2006, Washington, DC – A group of prominent U.S. human rights and democracy organizations urged Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to support a new proposal to establish an effective and credible UN Human Rights Council in a joint letter issued today.

On February 23, the President of the UN General Assembly released a new proposal that, if approved by Member States of the UN, would replace the existing UN Commission on Human Rights with a potentially stronger and more effective Human Rights Council. The organizations are supporting the proposal's adoption as it "represents a concrete step in the right direction and offers all of us a reasonable basis to stay engaged and fight for making the Council as effective as possible."

The letter to Rice points out that the new proposal includes criteria that would potentially improve the body's membership and effectiveness, including:

- Member states must be elected by absolute majority in direct and individual voting.
- For the first time governments should consider a candidate's human rights record, pledges and commitments when electing members.
- Also for the first time, members of the Council that commit gross and systematic violations of human rights may be suspended.
- Meetings will take place at least three times a year for ten weeks, instead of just one six-week session a year, and additional sessions may be called by one-third of the Council membership enabling the body to address urgent cases of gross violations.
- A system of universal periodic review offers a new opportunity to hold states accountable to their human rights obligations in a less politicized process.

The letter's authors acknowledge that they had hoped and advocated for even stronger provisions in the proposed resolution but, they write, "under current circumstances, efforts to reopen the text or other delays in closing down the old Commission and establishing the new Council will not lead to a better result."

Ted Piccone, Executive Director of the Democracy Coalition Project, noted "This is a consensus document that reflects months of contentious negotiations and is only the first step in reforming the body. The Council's legitimacy and effectiveness will ultimately be determined by the political will of member states to elect candidates that respect human rights and to use it to promote and protect the rights embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."

The letter, pasted below, urges the United States to adopt the resolution and turn its attention to working "closely with its democratic allies to ensure that the best possible candidates are put forward by each region and to insist that nominations be announced at least thirty days prior to election, to allow for public scrutiny of their human rights records and pledges."

The letter was sent directly to the State Department and the U.S Mission to the UN in New York.

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February 23, 2006

The Honorable Condoleezza Rice
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Rice:

We are urgently writing to request that the United States support the draft resolution for the new Human Rights Council proposed today by the President of the General Assembly.

This has not been an easy decision for us as it will not be for the United States. We have pushed hard for a more ambitious result than the one presented by Ambassador Eliasson as a consensus text after months of intensive negotiations. We have concluded, however, that the proposal represents a concrete step in the right direction and offers all of us a reasonable basis to stay engaged and fight for making the Council as effective as possible.

We believe that certain elements of the proposal are an improvement from the current situation and will increase chances for a better membership of the Council. Member states must be elected by absolute majority in direct and individual voting. For the first time governments should consider a candidate's human rights record, pledges and commitments. Also for the first time, members of the Council that commit gross and systematic violations of human rights may be suspended. Meetings will take place at least three times a year for ten weeks, instead of just one six-week session a year, and additional sessions may be called by one-third of the Council membership. These elements are vitally important to calling international attention to urgent cases of gross violations and forcing action to address them. A system of universal periodic review offers a new opportunity to hold states accountable to their human rights obligations in a less politicized process. Special procedures will be retained as will the tradition of access for nongovernmental organizations.

We believe that, under current circumstances, efforts to reopen the text or other delays in closing down the old Commission and establishing the new Council will not lead to a better result. Rather, we urge the United States to work closely with its democratic allies to ensure that the best possible candidates are put forward by each region and to insist that nominations be announced at least thirty days prior to election, to allow for public scrutiny of their human rights records and pledges.

We respectfully request a meeting with you at your earliest convenience to discuss further how we can work together to realize the potential this new Council offers.

Sincerely,

Eric Olson, Acting Director for Government Relations
Amnesty International USA

Karin D. Ryan, Senior Advisor for Human Rights
The Carter Center

Don Kraus, Executive Vice President
Citizens for Global Solutions

Richard C. Rowson, President
Council for a Community of Democracies

Ted Piccone, Executive Director
Democracy Coalition Project

Gay McDougall, Executive Director
Global Rights-Partners for Justice

Gabor Rona, International Legal Director
Human Rights First

Kenneth Roth, Executive Director
Human Rights Watch

Gareth Evans, President and CEO
International Crisis Group

Morton Halperin, Director of US Advocacy
Open Society Institute

Leonard Rubenstein, Executive Director
Physicians for Human Rights

Cc: Under Secretary Nicholas Burns
Under Secretary Paula Dobriansky

Senator Richard Lugar
Senator Joseph Biden
Rep. Henry Hyde
Rep. Tom Lantos