

28 April 2009

The Honorable Hillary Clinton
United States Secretary of State
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton:

The pledges issued as part of the United States campaign for membership on the United Nations Human Rights Council are a welcome reiteration of your commitment to U.S. leadership on international human rights issues. They point toward a strategy of engagement that, when more fully developed, can begin to shape the Human Rights Council into a more effective and credible institution. We would urge the United States to use the occasion of its candidacy for the Human Rights Council as an opportunity to make more specific and tangible commitments to advancing the cause of human rights at home and abroad.

One of the U.S. commitments is to cooperate "with the UN's human rights mechanisms." As part of the U.S. campaign for the Human Rights Council, we encourage you to demonstrate this commitment by inviting all relevant UN special procedures holders to visit all U.S. detention facilities, including U.S. Naval Station Guantanamo Bay, without onerous restrictions or preconditions which would prejudice the special procedure holders' ability to conduct their inquiries.

Inviting the UN special procedures holders will achieve at least two important aims. First, it will strengthen U.S. moral authority in calling on other countries to accept UN assistance in achieving human rights improvements. The U.S. has a strong interest in ensuring that Council rapporteurs and experts have full access to investigate and report on human rights abuses around the world. By making this commitment now, the U.S. will position itself as a more credible voice on this essential dimension of the Council's work. Second, a public report from respected experts on international human rights norms would be an opportunity to begin to address lingering doubts and suspicious, especially in the Muslim world, about conditions in U.S. detention facilities. Making this commitment now would put the U.S. on stronger footing to build common ground with delegations that have been critical of the U.S.'s recent record on human rights issues.

We would also urge that the U.S. reiterate its firm support for the importance of competition in elections for seats on the Human Rights Council. Competitive elections are by far the most effective way to ensure that the Council is comprised of Member States able and willing to promote and defend human rights.

The U.S. campaign for the Human Rights Council is an opportunity not just to win membership, but to begin reshaping the UN human rights debate. Inviting the UN special procedures holders to visit all U.S. detention facilities and affirming the U.S.'s commitment to ensuring competitive elections for Council seats will strengthen U.S. ability to achieve your laudably ambitious goal "of improving the UN human rights system to advance the vision of the UN Declaration on Human Rights."

Respectfully,

Dokhi Fassihian
Executive Director
Democracy Coalition Project

Tom Malinowski
Washington Advocacy Director
Human Rights Watch

Stephen Rickard
Washington Director
Open Society Institute

Karin Ryan
Director, Human Rights Program
The Carter Center

cc. The Honorable Susan Rice, United States Representative to the United Nations
The Honorable Esther Brimmer, Assistant Secretary of State for International
Organizations
Karen Stewart, Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for
Democracy, Human Rights and Labor
Samantha Power, Senior Director for Multilateral Affairs, National Security
Council