

U.S. Urged to OK Plan for New U.N. Council

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UNITED NATIONS -- The United States came under pressure from key human rights groups to accept a compromise proposal to replace the discredited U.N. Human Rights Commission with a new Human Rights Council.

Ten advocacy groups sent a letter to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice on Thursday urging the United States to support the proposal. They called it "a concrete step in the right direction," even though it wasn't as strong as they had hoped, and warned that trying to change it "will not lead to a better result."

The letter was in response to comments from U.S. Ambassador John Bolton, who questioned whether the draft resolution would keep human rights abusers off the new council _ a key U.S. goal _ and raised the possibility of new negotiations.

The Geneva-based Human Rights Commission has been widely criticized by Western governments and human rights campaigners for allowing some of the worst-offending countries to use their membership to protect each other from condemnation or criticize others. In recent years, members have included Sudan, Libya, Zimbabwe and Cuba.

But replacing the commission, an idea first recommended by Secretary-General Kofi Annan in March 2005, has divided the 191-member U.N. General Assembly and sparked months of contentious negotiations.

General Assembly President Jan Eliasson, who has been facilitating the negotiations, called the resolution "balanced, strong and workable," saying it strengthens human rights and toughens the criteria for membership on the new Human Rights Council.

He urged the General Assembly to approve the resolution next week, saying that "while no member state has got everything it argued for," it was the best compromise.

The proposal would replace the 53-member Human Rights Commission with a 47-member Human Rights Council that would be elected by an absolute majority of the General Assembly's 96 members. Annan and human rights campaigners had argued for a two-thirds majority requirement to help keep out countries accused of abuses.

Every U.N. member state would be eligible for membership but the new draft toughens the criteria. Council members must "uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights, fully cooperate with the

council," and have their human rights records reviewed during their three-year term. All 191 U.N. members would eventually face such scrutiny.

Under the new proposal, the General Assembly could also suspend a member for "gross and systematic violations of human rights" by a two-thirds majority. Any country on the council, with the support of one-third of its members, could also call a special session, a provision aimed at getting a quick response to human rights emergencies.

Annan, who called last March for a small permanent human rights body to replace the highly politicized Human Rights Commission, said "it's not everything we asked for, but it's a credible effort to move ahead."

"I would suggest that the member states have had enough time to discuss, as the issues are known, and now is the time for a decision," he said.

But Bolton said a lot of points the U.S. wanted weren't in the text.

"Based on conversations we've had with other governments, the strongest argument in favor of this draft is that it's not as bad as it could be," he said.

Bolton said it was time to consider whether to start negotiations between nations, not with Eliasson as the "facilitator." The United States will study the draft, consult with other governments, and make a final decision, he said.

"What we have been looking for is a substantial reform of the existing human rights decision-making machinery in the U.N. and the question that's still before us is whether this amounts to a substantial reform," Bolton said.

In the letter to Rice, the 10 organizations said the decision to support the resolution wasn't easy because they had pushed for "a more ambitious result." But they said they had concluded it offered "a reasonable basis to stay engaged and fight for making the council as effective as possible."

The signatories were Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, Human Rights First, the Carter Institute, the International Crisis Group, the Open Society Institute, Citizens for Global Solutions, Council for a Community of Democracies, Democracy Coalition Project and Physicians for Human Rights.