

Better UN rights monitor

February 25, 2006

STAINED FOR too long by granting membership to notorious abusers of human rights, the United Nations Human Rights Commission has made the would-be parliament of nations look more like a conclave of crime families. It was to erase this stain that UN Secretary General Kofi Annan proposed last March a new Human Rights Council, which would be properly selective in choosing members, would stay in session longer, and would have a mandate truly to protect victims of human rights abuse.

Since last fall, members of the UN General Assembly have been haggling over a draft resolution authorizing the new council. Predictably, they have come up with a compromise document that falls short of what Annan, many governments, and human rights groups had desired. It's a shame that some countries were able to dilute key provisions that would have made it harder for the foxes to be elected guardians of the chicken coop.

Sad to say, the General Assembly's penchant for seeking the lowest common denominator, even for a Human Rights Council, reflects an intrinsic quality of that highly political body. It is an assembly not of peoples, but of states. It tends to protect the interests of states -- not of the dissident writer languishing in jail for what she has written nor of the democratic activist tortured for petitioning for representative government.

Nonetheless, the draft charter for a new Human Rights Council, which may be voted on next week, represents an improvement over the old commission. It establishes a sound standard for membership, makes it possible to suspend a derelict member for "gross and systematic violations of human rights," and creates a mechanism for calling special sessions to respond swiftly to human rights emergencies. As Annan observed as he asked General Assembly members to approve the compromise text, "Obviously, the proposal isn't everything I asked for . . . but I think it's a credible basis for moving ahead."

His call for members to vote to establish the new council soon has been echoed by organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International. John Bolton, US ambassador to the UN, has suggested, however, that he might prefer not to hold the vote and instead seek a better charter. To counter this notion, a group of 10 human rights and other nongovernmental organizations wrote to Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice calling the proposal for a council "a step in the right direction" and warning that further bargaining "will not lead to a better result."

Rice should not make the ideal a hindrance to the good. She should instruct Bolton to vote in favor of the new council and then act vigilantly to make sure the 47 members elected to defend human rights do exactly that. ■