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For Immediate Release

UN: Sri Lanka's Defeat a Victory for Human Rights Council

UN Vote Upholds Council Membership Standards on Rights

(New York, May 21, 2008) – UN member states enforced the standards they established for the new Human Rights Council by not re-electing Sri Lanka to the body today. Domestic and international human rights advocates who had opposed Sri Lanka's re-election to the council said the vote was a victory for human rights standards and for victims of abuse in Sri Lanka.

Fifteen seats on the 47-member council were filled in the election during the UN General Assembly, in which six candidates competed for the four open seats reserved for Asian countries. The UN assembly elected Japan with 155 votes, South Korea with 139, Pakistan with 114, and Bahrain with 142 votes. Sri Lanka failed to win election with 101 votes, as did the new state of Timor Leste, which garnered 92 votes.

In reconstituting the UN's leading human rights body in 2006, UN states required council members to “uphold the highest standards” of human rights and “fully cooperate” with the council. Sri Lanka was one of the initial members elected to the rights council in 2006, and strongly campaigned for re-election this year in New York, Geneva, and capitals around the world.

“We applaud UN members for rejecting an abusive state which has used its position on the Human Rights Council not to promote human rights, but to protect itself and other violator states from scrutiny,” said Steve Crawshaw, UN Advocacy Director at Human Rights Watch and spokesman for the NGO Coalition for an Effective Human Rights Council (www.hrw.org/effectiveHRC/SriLanka). “The defeat of Sri Lanka this year, and of Belarus last year, will help discourage other human rights violators from seeking or winning election to the council.”

In opposing re-election, a coalition of Sri Lankan nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) said that their government has “presided over a grave deterioration of human rights protection” since winning membership, and “has used its membership in the Human Rights Council to protect itself from scrutiny.” A coalition of NGOs from all regions of the world charged Sri Lanka with widespread disappearances, extrajudicial killings, torture, and a failure to cooperate with UN human rights experts. Three Nobel Peace Prize winners – Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa, Adolfo Pérez Esquivel of Argentina, and former

President Jimmy Carter of the United States – also called on UN Members to oppose Sri Lanka’s re-election bid (<http://www.hrw.org/english/docs/2008/05/19/slanka18868.htm>). A coalition of NGOs also successfully opposed the candidacy of Belarus for the Human Rights Council in 2007, when Belarus was defeated by Bosnia and Herzegovina on a second ballot in the General Assembly.

“The rejection of Sri Lanka after a global campaign lends vital support to the victims of abuse, and sends a strong message to the government of Sri Lanka,” said Michael Anthony, program coordinator of the Asian Human Rights Commission in Hong Kong. “We hope this result will open a new international dialogue with Sri Lanka that encourages the government to put an end to rampant violations by its security forces, and accept the assistance of human rights monitors from the United Nations. The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam also commit grave human rights abuses, but this does not justify government abuses, and the people of Sri Lanka would benefit greatly from UN monitoring of both sides to the conflict.”

There were competitive elections for the open seats allocated to two of the other five UN regional groups. To represent Western European and Others Group, UN members elected the United Kingdom and France, while Spain failed to win election. From Eastern Europe, Slovakia and Ukraine were elected, while Serbia was unsuccessful. A “closed slate” nominated by the African Group – Burkina Faso, Gabon, Ghana, and Zambia – all won the “absolute majority” required for election to the four open African seats, as did the three countries – Argentina, Brazil, and Chile – which ran uncontested for the three open seats allocated to Latin America and the Caribbean.

“We wish that there had been competitive elections in all five regions, as contemplated when the council was established,” said Franck Kamunga of the African Democracy Forum in Nairobi. “However, all of the countries elected this year have the potential to make a real contribution to promoting human rights. The important thing now is for the new council members to put aside political considerations and alliances and use their positions conscientiously to protect the victims of human rights abuse.”

While taking no position on whether Pakistan and Bahrain should have been elected to the council, the NGO Coalition for an Effective Human Rights Council specifically called on both governments to implement domestic human rights reforms and engage more constructively with other governments on the council.

“Pakistan and Bahrain must now live up to the standards set for Human Rights Council membership,” said Juliette de Rivero, Geneva director at Human Rights Watch. “They must work to strengthen the council’s capacity to protect the victims of human rights worldwide, rather than allowing abusive governments to be shielded from scrutiny.”

To read more about the Sri Lanka campaign, please visit:
<http://www.hrw.org/effectiveHRC/SriLanka>

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