January 14, 2009

Dear President-elect Obama,

We are writing to encourage you to begin your Administration with a strong commitment to international leadership on human rights issues. During your candidacy, you made clear that, when you became president, multilateral engagement and respect for human rights would be the order of the day. You promised to set a new course, saying "We must neither retreat from the world nor try to bully it into submission - we must lead the world, by deed and example." In order to set this new course and reestablish the United States as a leader on human rights in the international community, we strongly recommend that you:

» Send strong and immediate signals of U.S. reengagement.

» Mount a campaign to win a seat for the United States on the United Nations Human Rights Council and build a strategy to improve the Human Rights Council's performance.

» Engage in preparations for the Durban Review conference in order to turn the conference into a real contribution to the international fight against racism and other forms of discrimination, and to defeat the efforts of those who would seek to spoil this important conference.

Immediate Steps

Within your first months in office, your Administration will face critical challenges and opportunities to lead on human rights within the United Nations system. Two steps can put your Administration into a stronger position to face these challenges. First, you should immediately issue an open invitation to United Nations special rapporteurs to visit Guantanamo Bay. Second, because most UN human rights decisions are made only after substantial diplomatic negotiations, you should appoint a high-level U.S. envoy for human rights to engage other nations in their capitals around the globe.

Joining the Human Rights Council

There are few better prospects for showing the world that the United States is truly dedicated both to multilateral solutions and to human rights than by seeking membership in the United Nations Human Rights Council. With elections scheduled for May 2009, we strongly recommend that the United States announce its candidacy quickly and actively seek a seat on the Council.

Without U.S. involvement, the Council's performance to date is likely to continue to be disappointing, as it fails to effectively address the wide range of serious country situations around the world and maintains a one-sided focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Strengthening the Human Rights Council and enhancing its ability to make a real impact on human rights abuses throughout the world demands new leadership from the United States.

The United States cannot afford to stand on the sidelines as the world's leading intergovernmental body addresses human rights. In the past few years, as spoilers at the Human Rights Council have attempted

to encroach on some basic human rights, such as freedom of speech, and interfere with the independence of experts appointed by the Council and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, the United States has failed to engage. With a seat at the table, the United States can more effectively work on these and other issues that concern it most, particularly leading up to the planned review of the Council in 2011.

Human rights friendly countries have long implored the United States to join the Council. Key allies within the Council, including the United Kingdom and Canada, have repeatedly emphasized that U.S. participation would make a substantial difference in the work of the body. In addition, southern states, including South Africa, are now also pushing for the United States to join. As a Council member, the United States could encourage more positive results, by building coalitions across regional groups, thus discouraging regional bloc voting that seeks to protect human rights abusing countries within the bloc.

We therefore strongly recommend that your administration seek membership in the Human Rights Council at the May 2009 election, mount a robust campaign, and bring a strong and clear agenda to improve the Council's work and the situation of human rights worldwide. We firmly believe that, by taking the following steps, the United States will successfully secure a seat on the Council to the great benefit of the Council, human rights, and the United States itself:

- Announce the United States' candidacy for a seat on the Human Rights Council and articulate concrete pledges on human rights including closing Guantanamo and ending torture, renditions to torture, and secret detentions;
- Upgrade the U.S. presence at the Human Rights Council by appointing a fulltime Geneva-based ambassador for human rights;
- Actively participate in the upcoming Universal Periodic Review (February 2-13), of the Human Rights Council at which the records of Russia, Saudi Arabia, China, Nigeria and Cuba will be reviewed; and
- Using the new high-level envoy, commit the full weight of US diplomatic power to ensure the US campaign for a seat is successful, and then continue to invest in the Council by designing and implementing a strategy aimed at improving the Council's performance.

Making America's Voice Heard Against Racism

Although the 2001 Durban Conference degenerated into acrimony and resulted in the withdrawal of the U.S. delegation, the 2009 Durban Review Conference represents a significant opportunity for your administration to work toward an outcome that effectively fights racism and furthers international human rights. As the first African-American president of the United States, you can send a particularly strong signal that racism in any form is unacceptable.

The conference's outcome document will be adopted by consensus and thus presents an opportunity for the United States to build coalitions, shape the document, and challenge those opposed to human rights. Although some reports have suggested that spoiler states will set the agenda and the conference will have a negative result, such outcomes are in no way predetermined. As you may know, the negotiations process on the outcome document will begin the week of January 19, 2009—and at this point the agenda and final outcome is far from set. The immediate and strong engagement of your

administration will only create a more conducive environment for positive results. Should the United States and key human rights supporters abandon the Durban Review Conference at this point, it will assuredly take a path that fails to advance the struggle against racism and damages multilateral relationships critical to protection of human rights.

We recommend that the United States make clear its commitment to ensuring that the conference makes a real contribution to the fight against racism. To that end, we urge you to put in place a strategy for the conference which involves working with key allies to craft desired outcomes and so-called "red lines" for the outcome document of the conference. Although the conference will pose challenges, we believe that the United States' engagement cannot but help make it more productive.

Thank you for your attention to these very important issues. We look forward to supporting you in this agenda over the coming months and years.

Sincerely,

Citizens for Global Solutions

Democracy Coalition Project

Human Rights First

Human Rights Watch

Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights

United Nations Association of the U.S.A.

United Nations Foundation/Better World Campaign