



Was joining the Human Rights Council worth it?

Colum Lynch ■ Wednesday, 30 March 2011

Two years ago, President Barack Obama decided to join the U.N. Human Rights Council, ending the Bush Administration's policy of shunning the Geneva-based rights body on the grounds that it unfairly singled out Israel for rights abuses while providing political cover for countries with far worse rights records.

The State Department announced today that it would mount a campaign to renew its seat on the rights council, saying that its two-year stint has furthered American efforts to promote human rights around the world. It released a fact sheet that details U.S. accomplishments, including its efforts to ensure continued scrutiny of human rights abuses in Burma, North Korea, and Sudan.

"This is the primary arena where the global debate on human rights is unfolding," Suzanne Nossel, the U.S. deputy assistant secretary of state for International Organizations, told *Turtle Bay*. The United States, she says, needs to help shape that debate. "Being in there, making those arguments, we think is critical. We can't just cede the ground to those who just want to manipulate the forum and shield rights abusers."

The current council was established five years ago to replace the human rights commission. It includes membership by 47 countries, including Western democracies like the United States, France and Britain; powerful countries with poor rights records like China and Russia; and a number of developing countries with poor rights records, including Pakistan and Saudi Arabia. Cuba serves as one of the council's three vice presidents.

The announcement was praised by human rights advocates, who have long acknowledged the council's flaws but pushed the U.S. to try to reform the U.N. rights body from within. "I think the U.S. presence on the council has been extraordinarily positive," Kenneth Roth, the executive director of Human Rights Watch told *Turtle Bay*. "There's no question that the council is a much more effective institution because of the U.S. presence."

Roth said that while the countries with poor rights records continue to pursue seats on the rights council U.S. diplomats and human rights groups have succeeded in blocking some of the "most obnoxious," including Iran and Belarus. He said his organization is currently seeking to persuade the U.N. Asia group to drop its support for Syria, which is currently seeking a seat on the council. "The Asian group has to decide, does it put up a candidate who is shooting at demonstrators. My suspicion is that either Syria will withdraw or another Asian candidate will emerge to challenge Syria."

But the U.S. continued to face criticism of its decision to rejoin the human rights body from conservative analysts and defenders of Israel, who maintain that U.S. participation in the council only lends legitimacy to a body that doesn't deserve it. Critics point out the U.S. membership has improperly enhanced the legitimacy of a U.N. rights agency, where member states spend more time deflecting criticism of their own rights records than promoting human

behavior. "It remains an enormously pernicious organization dedicated almost exclusively to bashing Israel," Danielle Pletka, a long-standing critic of U.S. participation in the council at the American Enterprise Institute, told *Turtle Bay*. "Does it help more than it hurts? I think the answer is obviously that it hurts more than it helps."

The Washington Post's editorial page added its voice to the debate, belittling the administration's effort to promote human rights in Geneva as largely irrelevant. "The Bush administration concluded that any human rights body to which such governments could gain membership was not worthy of U.S. participation. The Obama administration has spent the past two years trying mightily to prove otherwise. Thanks to its efforts, the council has gotten a little better. But is it really the best vehicle for advancing the cause of human rights? Our guess is that a few more speeches on Iran by the president and secretary of state, not to mention stronger backing for the Green Movement there, would do a lot more good than a U.N. special rapporteur."

Among the most dramatic recent developments at the rights council, cited by the State Department, was the council's decision, backed by African and Arab countries, to condemn Moammar Qaddafi's repression of Libyan protesters. That action was followed by a series of U.N. Security Council resolutions sanctions Qaddafi's regime and setting the stage for a military confrontation. The U.N. General Assembly, meanwhile, voted last month to suspend Libya's membership in the rights body.

Earlier this month, the United States worked with Pakistan to pass a resolution, adopted by consensus, which highlighted the importance of protecting freedom of speech and combating religious persecution. The resolution's passage, according to the United States, marked the end to the divisive debate over a series of Islamic-backed resolution calling for the criminalization of religious defamation.

In Cote d'Ivoire, the United States joined African governments in convening a special session on rights abuses by forces loyal to Laurent Gbagbo, who lost the country's November runoff election but refused to step down. The council also created a commission of inquiry to investigate mass crimes in the West African country, a move that often paves the way to war crimes prosecutions.

But the U.S. also cited their efforts to raise the profile of human rights in Tunisia and Guinea. It also highlighted its role in pressing for the adoption of a resolution that addressed human rights abuses against ethnic Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan in June, 2010. The move, according to the State Department fact sheet, "paved the way for a commission of inquiry to investigate these events."

Nossel said that the council's tendency to "apply a different set of rules" to Israel than it does to other countries remains its "Achilles heel." She also said that there is still "an impulse" among some states "to close ranks and protect governments than focusing on human rights" abuses. But she said that council provides a forum for strengthening the United States human rights advocacy. It has an impact, she said, "above and beyond what any individual country can achieve through statements and actions."