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UN Human Rights Council: A victory for human rights protection

Amnesty International welcomes the overwhelming vote by the UN General Assembly today in favour of establishing a new Human Rights Council. In doing so, UN member states have taken an historic step towards strengthening the UN's human rights machinery.

The US government's decision to vote against the resolution was regrettable. However the result, 170 in favour, 4 opposed and 3 abstaining, demonstrates unambiguous international support for the Council.

"This is a victory for human rights protection around the world," said Yvonne Terlingen, UN representative for Amnesty International, "although the hard work is only just beginning. It is encouraging to hear that, despite voting against the resolution, the US government will cooperate with the Council and support it."

The next task is for all states to work together to elect Council members who are solidly committed to upholding human rights and ensuring that the Council is strong and effective.

Amnesty International calls on all candidate countries to:

Declare publicly their commitment to uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights when they decide to stand for election; and
Announce their candidacies no later than 8 April 2006 – at least thirty days before elections on 9 May 2006.

Election to the Council will be by individual secret ballot and members will have to achieve the absolute majority support of the General Assembly. Regional groups have a responsibility to ensure that the spirit of transparency for election to the Council is respected. Previous practice, in which regional groups presented closed lists of countries immediately before elections, as occurred in the UN Commission for Human Rights, must stop.

"All those elected to the Council must uphold the highest human rights standards, must cooperate fully with the Council and must accept review of their own human rights record during their term of membership. Any country not prepared to meet these requirements should not apply," said Yvonne Terlingen.

Background:

The draft resolution adopted today establishes a Council with a clear mandate to address all human rights situations. The Council will have a more frequent meeting schedule (at least three times a year) and the

ability to convene more easily in special sessions, thereby allowing it to react more effectively to both chronic and urgent situations. The new universal review mechanism should ensure that all countries' human rights records are addressed periodically.

The resolution establishes an election procedure, which if taken seriously by UN member states, can give the Council a membership much more committed to the promotion and protection of human rights than the Commission on Human Rights in recent years. Instead of slates being adopted by acclamation as for the Commission, each member of the Council must be elected individually. A higher threshold of votes applies - at least 96 individual votes out of 191 members. All membership terms are limited to a maximum of six years. Those committing gross and systematic violations of human rights can have their membership suspended by a two-thirds majority of members of the General Assembly. The resolution also preserves key strengths of the Commission, including its unique system of independent experts known as "Special Procedures" and its practices of NGO participation. Amnesty International expects that the Council will adopt an agenda that lends itself to better dialogue and action than the overloaded agenda of the Commission on Human Rights.

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