

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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FIRST ELECTIONS TO THE NEW UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL: 9 May 2006

Amnesty International calls on all member states to ensure that the 47 members of the Human Rights Council are fully committed to the promotion and protection of human rights.

On 15 March 2006, the United Nations General Assembly voted overwhelmingly in favour of establishing a new Human Rights Council to replace the Commission on Human Rights. Amnesty International considers this a historic step towards strengthening the UN's human rights machinery and improving global human rights protection.

The Human Rights Council can be a strong and effective human rights body capable of promotion and protection of all human rights in all countries. The next crucial step in this process is to elect a Council membership with demonstrated commitment to uphold human rights both internationally and nationally. Amnesty International calls on all member states to:

- declare their candidacy 30 days in advance of the 9 May election, i.e. by Monday 10 April 2006, if standing for election;
- make strong and credible public human rights pledges to support their candidacy; and
- cast their vote only for candidate countries committed to human rights, and without trading votes, i.e. without asking states to support their election to the Human Rights Council in return for backing other states seeking membership of the Council or other UN bodies.

How can a candidate country demonstrate its commitment to human rights?

Amnesty International calls on all countries seeking election to the new Human Rights Council to make specific and credible public pledges to promote and protect human rights, in their own country as well as internationally as a member of the Council. These commitments must demonstrate that the candidate states will:

1. Work for an efficient and effective Human Rights Council, for example by committing to:

- ensuring effective responses to human rights violations wherever they occur, including by responding to human rights crisis;
- strengthening the system of Special Procedures and other expert mechanisms of the Council;
- improving the opportunities for contributions to the Council from non-governmental organizations.

2. Promote and protect human rights at home and abroad, including by:

cooperating fully with the Special Procedures of the Council by responding quickly and in full to their communications. This involves acting in good faith on their recommendations, issuing a standing invitation and facilitating visits as requested, including by ensuring free and unfettered access for the experts;
ratifying and implementing all human rights treaties and the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court, removing any limiting reservations, and providing for individual communications, inquiry and inspection;
cooperating fully with the treaty monitoring bodies, including by submitting periodic reports on time, and acting in good faith on their concluding observations and recommendations.

Background

The election of the Council's first members will take place on 9 May 2006. The rules governing the election to the Human Rights Council require UN Member States to take account of candidates' human rights record and pledges. To gain a seat, each of the 47 members of the Council must achieve an absolute majority (96 votes) support of the 191 members of the General Assembly in individual elections held by secret ballot. In casting their votes, all Member States must satisfy themselves that candidates, if elected, will uphold the highest standards in the promotion and protection of human rights, cooperate fully with the Council and be reviewed under the universal periodic review mechanism during their term of membership.

The new Human Rights Council will retain the best elements of the Commission, including its system of Special Procedures and its practices of NGO participation. The Council has the potential to be significantly more effective than the Commission: it has a clear mandate to address all human rights situations, including gross and systematic violations, and a new universal review mechanism to ensure that all countries' human rights records are addressed periodically. It will meet in more frequent session, at least three times a year for at least ten weeks. The Council will be able to convene more easily in special sessions to respond more effectively to both chronic and urgent human rights situations. Importantly, the rules governing the election to the Human Rights Council require that UN Member States take account of candidates' human rights record and pledges. Faithful application of these rules can give the Council a membership fully committed to the promotion and protection of human rights.