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States set out their vision and commitments as candidates to the UN Human Rights Council

Joint public statement by Amnesty International and International Service for Human Rights on UN Human Rights Council pledging event held in New York on 15 July 2015

Ahead of elections to the UN Human Rights Council this fall, eight candidate States set out their vision for Council membership if elected, and responded to questions on their human rights commitments. This dialogue took place at an event hosted at UN Headquarters by Amnesty International and International Service for Human Rights (ISHR), in partnership with the Permanent Missions of Botswana, Brazil and the Netherlands.

Belgium, Germany, Georgia, Kyrgyzstan, Panama, the Republic of Korea, Slovenia and Switzerland elaborated on their pledges, and were questioned on how they would work as members to address human rights violations and to strengthen the work of the Council.

“In countries around the world, public meetings like this are a fixture of elections – a chance for voters to hear from the candidates, to better understand the motivations of those seeking office.” said moderator Charles Radcliffe, Chief of Global Issues Section, Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). “Today we have such an opportunity to engage in dialogue with candidates on their specific pledges made as part of their application to join what is, after all, the world’s peak intergovernmental body on human rights.”

The terms of 18 out of the 47 members of the Human Rights Council conclude in 2015. Whilst some States are standing for a second consecutive term, other candidates are running for Council membership for the first time. UN General Assembly Resolution 60/251, which established the Council, outlines a competitive procedure to select its members, and stipulates that States’ human rights records and pledges should be taken into account.

“At this event, States present their credentials to stand as Human Rights Council members”, said Nicole Bjerler of Amnesty International’s UN Office in New York. “Both candidates and members of the audience can thereby reflect on what membership on the Council means in terms of protecting and promoting rights at home and at UN level.”

Regrettably, four of the five regional groups are running ‘closed slates’ this year, where the number of candidates matches the number of available seats. “Running closed slates all but guarantee victories for the candidates, regardless of their human rights records, thus potentially opening the Council’s door to membership by ‘abuser’ States”, said Eleanor Openshaw of ISHR.

The audience in the room and those following the debate on the UN webcast, which included member states and civil society representatives, raised questions on such diverse topics as the situation of migrants, discrimination and violence on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, women's rights and gender equality, the right to privacy and surveillance by States, torture and other forms of ill-treatment, and indigenous peoples' rights. Questions were also raised about the Council's work on country specific situations.

In response to questions raised, several candidates stressed the importance of realising human rights at home, including by implementing recommendations coming from the Human Rights Council and its mechanisms. Several highlighted the importance of the role of civil society in this process.

"We are delighted that many candidates expressed their support for effective civil society engagement with the UN, and that they recognize that NGOs are essential in bringing a fresh perspective and the view from the ground to the UN", said Ms Bjerler.

Candidates reflected on how to address country-specific situations, including through dialogue, prevention, reacting to early warning signs and addressing serious human rights situations.

"We were encouraged to hear several States, including Belgium, Germany, Georgia, Panama, Republic of Korea, Switzerland deplore the use of no-action motions during UN meetings. They emphasized the importance of holding discussions on the substance of human rights irrespective of the topic at hand", said Ms Openshaw.

This is the fourth time that Amnesty International and ISHR have co-hosted this annual event for Human Rights Council candidates. "We are delighted to see more and more States prepared to participate, and welcome their active engagement and support for the event," said Ms Bjerler.

Regrettably, only eight of the 20 candidates for election, from only four out of the five regional groups, chose to participate in the event this year. "We encourage all State candidates to see this as an opportunity in future to demonstrate the kind of transparency and accountability that is expected of all Council members," said Ms Openshaw.

A webcast of the event is available here: <http://webtv.un.org/meetings-events/watch/human-rights-council-elections-a-discussion-of-candidates%E2%80%99-aspirations-and-vision-for-membership/4356449316001>

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