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UN Human Rights Council: Review - Governments protecting themselves rather than taking steps to protect victims of human rights violations

On 7 February 2011, at the second Intergovernmental Working Group session on the Review of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, the Cairo Institute for Human Rights Studies, the International Federation for Human Rights, the International Service for Human Rights and the International Commission of Jurists raised their concerns at the lack of progress in the review of the Human Rights Council in the following statement delivered by Human Rights Watch:

Mr. President, as the first day of the second session of the Intergovernmental Working Group on the Review draws to a close we are gravely concerned by the lack of progress of the review. The lack of goodwill to address the weaknesses in the work and functioning of the Council and the categorical refusal to even consider options that would improve the Council's performance are deplorable.

The statements we have heard today are almost an exact replica of those we heard in October 2010. Little has moved. Several Governments are holding up negotiations by making believe that everything in the Council works well. The same way they often try to make believe that everything is fine in their own countries. Countries that have no checks and balances, no freedoms, no independent institutions, repressed or inexistent civil society think they have little to gain in a Council which is strengthened to address violations more effectively. They are mistaken on both counts.

For years these countries have denounced double standards and selectivity. But when given the opportunity to create mechanisms that address the selectivity and politicization in the Council through the intergovernmental process, they have been dismissive and shown no interest in discussing or considering these proposals.

Time and time again, during the review these Governments have reminded us that this is a review not a reform process. That everything should stay as it is. Yet the Council does not exist in a vacuum – the work of the Council and its function is to protect human rights in concrete places, for concrete victims.

Despite its explicit mandate to address and prevent violations, the Council has been made a passive spectator of many human rights situations, from Iraq to Guantanamo, from Iran to Zimbabwe, to the brutal repression of peaceful demonstrations in Tunisia and Egypt. Mr. President the reality is that the Council is disconnected from a majority of victims of human rights violations. Those governments that want to make believe that the Council is doing fine and that no

improvements are needed in its responsiveness to violations are more concerned about protecting themselves than fulfilling the mandate of the Human Rights Council.

A review that does not deal with the Council's failure to protect human rights in concrete situations will be a failed one, and it is obvious to all which governments will be responsible for that outcome.

At the outset of the second session of this 2nd Intergovernmental Working Group session on the Review, the Egyptian Ambassador presented seven so-called pillars of wisdom on behalf of the NAM? Nowhere in those pillars did we hear the words human rights, protection, prevention, responsibility? Were they forgotten, omitted, negated? Or was that statement intended to remind all that the Review is more about making states feel comfortable than it is about addressing the protection needs of victims? When the Egyptian Ambassador spoke in the Working Group to reject all proposals put forward to improve the Councils' actions in situations of violations, the only image that came to mind was the image of the Egyptian people rising up against the rhetoric of a State that's disconnected from its people.

The Council must connect itself to the realities on the ground in large parts of the world. We call on all States to work constructively with the proposals in the *Compilation of contributions*. We call on all States to reject the vision of the review that undermines any attempt to improve the Council's response to real situations of human rights violations. That vision is not only bankrupt but is, over time, a real recipe for the demise of the body.

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For more information please call Amnesty International's press office in London, UK, on +44 20 7413 5566 or email: press@amnesty.org

International Secretariat, Amnesty International, 1 Easton St., London WC1X 0DW, UK
www.amnesty.org