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UN Commission fails to uphold human rights in fight against terror

(Geneva, 26 April): International human rights organizations - Amnesty International, FIDH, Human Rights Watch and International Commission of Jurists - expressed dismay at the Commission on Human Rights' failure to adopt measures to protect human rights in the fight against terror.

A resolution presented by Mexico called for counter-terrorist measures to be compatible with international human rights and humanitarian law. The resolution would have requested the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights to monitor and analyse counter-terrorist laws and measures and make recommendations to governments and UN bodies, including in their implementation of Security Council resolutions on counter-terrorism.

The proposed resolution had been co-sponsored by the European Union (including Security Council members France and the UK); many central and east European and Latin American governments, New Zealand and Nigeria.

Mexico today reluctantly withdrew the proposed resolution in the face of concerted pressure from the United States, a wrecking amendment from Algeria and other governments, and weakness on the part of the European Union.

"From Illinois in the US to Xinjiang in China, counter-terrorist measures have placed human rights at risk," the organizations warned. "The Commission's silence on this critical issue sends a dangerous signal that in the fight against terrorism, anything goes."

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson earlier called on the Commission to ensure that counter-terrorist measures were not used as a pretext for suppression.

"This could have been one of the most important outcomes from this Commission, but instead has become one of its lowest points," the organizations said. "The Mexican resolution enjoyed broad support from the Commission, but was prevented by key players from even coming to the vote."

While the Mexican initiative could have helped to protect Muslim minorities and other vulnerable groups, it was derailed by governments such as Algeria, Egypt, India, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia which have used counter-terrorist measures to suppress dissent. At the same time, the US also strongly resisted the proposed resolution, apparently on grounds that it could tie the hands of the Security Council and lead to criticism of US Government policies. The European Union - particularly Spain, France and the UK - failed to maintain a united position under this concerted pressure.

"As the UN's supreme human rights body, we look to the Commission to defend human rights when they are under threat," the organizations said. "The UN Security Council's Counter Terrorism Committee previously claimed that protection of human rights was a matter for other UN bodies."

The human rights organizations called on the High Commissioner for Human Rights, regardless of the failure of the resolution, to produce an analytical report on the effects of anti-terrorism measures on human rights.

"This is too important an issue to let die at the Commission," the organizations said. "The High Commissioner has the authority to act on her own and she should."

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