

UNITED NATIONS



**OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER
FOR HUMAN RIGHTS**



STATEMENT

By

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**HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS URGES
SUPPORT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL**

The proposal presented by the President of the General Assembly to establish the Human Rights Council provides a unique opportunity to start putting in place a reinvigorated system for the promotion and protection of fundamental freedoms around the world and deserves the support of member States. Failure to adopt the proposal threatens to set back the human rights cause immeasurably.

The text submitted to the General Assembly by its President has the features to allow the future Council to deal more objectively, and credibly, with human rights violations worldwide. It sets standards for new member countries, who will be asked to make an explicit commitment to promote and protect human rights. It also provides for the suspension of members who commit gross and systematic abuses.

Unlike the Commission, the Council will be required to review on a periodic basis the human rights records of all countries, beginning with its members. No country will be beyond scrutiny, and no longer will countries be able to use membership of the UN's premier human rights body to shield themselves or allies from criticism or censure for rights breaches.

The Council will also meet for longer periods throughout the year and be able to respond quickly to developing human rights crises. Potential violators would be on notice that the world was watching permanently, not just for six weeks in the spring, when the Commission traditionally comes together.

The Commission gave the international community the Universal Declaration on Human Rights and a number of core treaties to protect fundamental freedoms. During its annual sessions, the Commission drew attention to many human rights issues and debates. It allowed the grievances of individuals to be brought to the world stage and provided the only international forum for civil society to confront abusers. The Council will keep these important functions as well as the existing system of independent human rights investigators. One of those experts was among the first to warn of impending genocide in Rwanda.

Let us be clear: the proposal now before the General Assembly is the result of compromise. It cannot be an ideal blueprint. And there is no reason to believe that more negotiating time will yield a better result.

But even an institution that is perfect on paper cannot succeed if the international community does not make the necessary change in the culture of defending human rights. It was in large part its failure to make this change – its inability to reinvent itself after laying down the framework for the international human rights system -- that hobbled the Commission. The case of Rwanda is sadly instructive. There the Commission's procedures worked, yet the investigator's warnings went unheeded. The political will and commitment of the international community will be as important to making the new Council work as any changes in structure or working methods.

ABOUT OHCHR

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) helps protect and promote all human rights around the world. Headquartered in Geneva, the Office is also present in over 40 countries. OHCHR works to ensure the enforcement of universally recognized human rights norms, including through promoting both the universal ratification and implementation of human rights treaties and respect for the rule of law. It also aims to remove obstacles to the full realization of all human rights and to prevent or stop human rights abuses. For more information please visit www.ohchr.org

About the High Commissioner

The High Commissioner is the principal UN official with responsibility for human rights and is accountable to the Secretary-General. The post of High Commissioner was created in 1993. Louise Arbour of Canada has been the High Commissioner for Human Rights since July 2004.

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