

March 11, 2009

The Honorable Hillary Clinton
United States Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Clinton,

We would like to congratulate you on your decision to reengage as an observer in the United Nations Human Rights Council. This decision sends an early signal to the international community of the Administration's support for the promotion and protection of human rights. We welcome your commitment to multilateral engagement and believe this is a pivotal first step towards advancing the global human rights agenda.

The Human Rights Council is the only global intergovernmental body addressing human rights, but since its inception in 2006 it has failed to live up to its potential. With a host of serious human rights situations around the world and the mandated 2011 review of the Council on the horizon, it is clear that leadership from the United States is needed now more than ever. With elections scheduled for May 2009, we strongly encourage the Administration to quickly and actively seek full membership this year. The United States has urged competitive elections as a way to improve membership in the Human Rights Council, and should demonstrate that commitment by competing on an open slate within the Western European and Others Group. By launching a campaign built upon a clear platform to improve the Council's work, we firmly believe that the United States can begin to chart a new course for the Council to the benefit of international human rights and broader U.S. foreign policy goals.

Without strong engagement from the U.S. and other strong proponents of human rights, the Council's performance is likely to remain disappointing. The one-sided focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is both disproportionate and counterproductive, and the Council has failed to address the wide range of serious country situations. Bloc voting has perpetuated this problem, as human rights violators protect each other and effectively gain impunity for their actions. Moreover, there have been attempts by spoilers to encroach on basic human rights, such as freedom of expression, and interfere with the independence of experts appointed by the Council and the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights.

The current situation has demonstrated that the stakes are too high to leave this essential work to others. Human rights friendly countries have long implored the United States to join the Council. Key allies within the Council, including the United Kingdom and Canada, have repeatedly emphasized that United States participation would make a substantial difference in the work of the body. In addition, southern states, including South Africa, are now also pushing for the United States to join.

The 2011 review of the Human Rights Council presents a key opportunity to strengthen its weaknesses through reevaluating its structure, policies and procedures. Working from within, the United States could begin to lay the groundwork this year for a credible and productive review to maximize the

efficacy of the Council. If the U.S. spends the next year as an observer instead of a full member, it will not have this same leverage.

As a Council member, the United States could encourage more positive results by building coalitions across regional groups and by ensuring that other serious human rights issues, such as Darfur, the rights of women, and political and religious freedom, are addressed by the international community. The United States should also utilize its leverage to ensure the Universal Periodic Review, a unique and potentially powerful tool, serves its intended purpose and holds all Member States accountable for their actions.

Thank you for your attention to this very important issue. We look forward to supporting a strong U.S. re-engagement with the international human rights machinery and to working with you to create a stronger, more effective UN Human Rights Council.

Sincerely,

Larry Cox, Executive Director, Amnesty International USA

Spencer P. Boyer, Director of International Law and Diplomacy, Center for American Progress

Don Kraus, CEO, Citizens for Global Solutions

Jennifer Windsor, Executive Director, Freedom House

Joe Volk, Executive Secretary, Friends Committee on National Legislation

Elisa Massimino, CEO and Executive Director, Human Rights First

Kenneth Roth, Executive Director, Human Rights Watch

Aryeh Neier, President, Open Society Institute

William H. Luers, President, United Nations Association of the U.S.A.

Timothy E. Wirth, President, United Nations Foundation/Better World Campaign