

The UN Fails Again

Contributed by Tom Kilgannon
Monday, 15 May 2006

Eleanor Roosevelt's dream of a global institution that values personal dignity and individual freedom suffered another set back at the United Nations this week as UN delegates continued their time honored tradition of rewarding dictators with prized seats on the organization's human rights body.

Apologists for the UN's new Human Rights Council pointed to Iran's failure to gain membership as evidence that the new council is a much improved body, but they glossed over the election of repressive regimes like Communist China, Saudi Arabia, Cuba, Algeria, Cameroon and Azerbaijan, to name a few.

Secretary General Kofi Annan predicted the Council's members will "show the depth of their commitment to promote human rights at home and abroad," despite the election of 22 countries that are considered "not free" or only "partly free" by Freedom House. General Assembly President Jan Eliasson called the vote a "truly historic occasion."

China is one of those nations that will cast judgment on the liberties of individuals around the world and is led by Hu Jintao who is ranked number six on Parade magazine's 2006 list of "The World's 10 Worst Dictators." The editors at Parade write that in China, "between 250,000 and 300,000 political dissidents are held in 'reeducation-through-labor' camps without trial." Privacy is a little understood concept in China as communications such as phone calls, e-mail, and Internet are routinely monitored by government agents. An organization known as Human Rights in China said in the last 17 years it "has documented continued and increasing detentions, arrests and other forms of persecutions."

Appearing at number seven on Parade's list of dictators is King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia which was also rewarded with a seat on the Human Rights Council. The House of Saud, where women are treated like third-class citizens, received more votes in the General Assembly for a Council seat than did Switzerland.

Among the other stalwarts of tolerance that were elected to the Human Rights Council are Bangladesh whose rights record is listed by the State Department as "poor" and which restricts religious freedom and freedom of the press; Cameroon where activists are, according to Amnesty International, "routinely harassed, detained and assaulted"; and Cuba whose totalitarian regime imprisons political opponents and suppresses political, religious and economic freedoms.

This is the new and "improved" United Nations Human Rights Council ? and Kofi Annan can keep it.

U.S. Ambassador John Bolton was right to withhold American prestige from the reconstituted rights regime because it was flawed from the beginning. The United Nations ensured that rights abusers would make it onto the Council when it guaranteed 13 seats each to the African and Asian regions ? where democracy and government accountability is in short supply. But the Western European region, where stability and respect for individual freedom is the norm, was only given seven seats on the Council.

John Bolton should be applauded for ensuring that the United States no longer has to swallow its pride and sidle up next to brutal dictators on while discussing human rights. But the United States can, and should do more. The Bush administration should withhold funding for the Human Rights Council. When and if the Council proves itself responsible, the United States can consider funding a worthwhile institution. But in the interim, American tax dollars should not be given to countries like Cuba and China to give themselves a political makeover and kick the United States in the teeth.