

Toward the Future: Human Rights Council

"The peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women."

~The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948

What is the Commission on Human Rights?

The Commission on Human Rights (CHR) was created in 1946 by the United Nations in response to international outcry over grave human rights violations following World Wars I and II. As the world's first and only international human rights monitoring body, the CHR became the primary venue for responding to human rights violations around the world. From the start, the United States was actively involved with the CHR. Then First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt played a pivotal role in the formation of the Commission and was elected as its first Chairperson. She also played a vital role in writing substantial portions of what now stands as the most important proclamation of human rights—the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Currently, the CHR is composed of 53 UN Member States that are elected for three-year terms. It meets for six weeks every year to consider cases of human rights violations from around the globe. Once it reviews a case, the CHR renders a decision in the form of a resolution and calls on the violating state and the international community at large to take decisive steps to address the abuses that have taken place.

Why do we need to shift from the Commission to a Human Rights Council?

Throughout the decades, the Commission has brought the world's attention to the issue of human rights and attempted to rectify abuses committed against individuals of all regions and countries. Yet with the 21st century come new challenges and obstacles, and the international community must make sure that increased threats to human life, liberty, and security is met with an equally strong and capable human rights monitoring body. To this end, world leaders must draw on the Commission's mandate while simultaneously improving key procedural aspects to combat human rights violations more effectively. For example, one of the challenges faced by the Commission is how members are elected. Currently, membership guarantees that all regions are represented. However, this has led to the exclusion of some countries while allowing over-inclusion of others. Furthermore, it has allowed countries such as Liberia, Zimbabwe, Saudi Arabia and Sudan to cover up human rights abuses in their countries rather than advance better practices.

In addition, the Commission on Human Rights presently meets six weeks every year. Thus, it is difficult to give crises that arise outside those weeks sufficient attention.

In an effort to continue the work of the Commission and keep the protection of human rights at the forefront, a major report called the *High Level Panel Report on Threats, Challenges and Change* called for an enhanced human rights body in December 2004. In March 2005, Secretary General Kofi Annan released his report *In Larger Freedom* in which he proposed shifting from the Commission on Human Rights to a Human Rights Council. The Bush Administration has welcomed

this initiative. In June, a bipartisan taskforce report, *American Interests and UN Reform*, headed by former House Speaker Gingrich and Senate Majority Leader Mitchell, also endorsed the idea of a stronger, more effective Human Rights Council.

How will the Council work?

From September 14-16, the United Nations hosted the largest gathering of world leaders in history. More than 150 heads of state agreed to strengthen human rights at the United Nations and resolved to create a Human Rights Council.

Although this is an important step, countries could not agree on the exact makeup, criteria, or a firm timetable for the creation of the new Council. Negotiators agreed to continue discussions over the course of the year to overcome disagreements.

About Citizens for Global Solutions

Citizens for Global Solutions envisions a future in which nations work together to abolish war, protect our rights and freedoms, and solve the problems facing humanity that no nation can solve alone. This vision requires effective democratic global institutions that will apply the rule of law while respecting the diversity and autonomy of national and local communities. We work to build political will for our vision in the United States by educating Americans about our global interdependence, communicating global concerns to public officials, and developing proposals to create, reform, and strengthen international institutions such as the United Nations.

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