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OBAMA'S MOMENT ON HUMAN RIGHTS: THE US SHOULD MAKE JOINING THE UN HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL A PRIORITY

Washington, DC: After eight years of neglect, President-elect Barack Obama is eager to have the United States re-engage with the United Nations. A good way to begin would be to join the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.

President Bush snubbed the preeminent international human rights policymaking body when it was established in 2006, with disastrous results. A speedy reversal by Mr. Obama would give hope to moderate governments that yearn for a stronger UN human rights program. It would also invigorate the entire UN system, generate goodwill, and encourage others to help with tough policy challenges like Guantanamo Bay.

There is no time to be lost.

Dec. 10 is the 60th anniversary of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights, but it will not be much of a celebration. The UN's human rights program has been badly weakened by an ill-advised reform and by America's absence from the Human Rights Council.

Until 2006, UN human rights policy was made by the Human Rights Commission, a body of 53 governments that included Sudan and Zimbabwe. Sudan's membership, at the peak of the genocide in Darfur, caused outrage in Washington and prompted calls for reform. The commission was voted out of existence in 2005 and replaced by the council.

The problem is that no governments have clean hands when it comes to human rights, so basing election to the council on good behavior would have excluded most of the world's powerful governments. That would not have been credible.

As a result, the new council was organized along the lines of the much-maligned commission, into five regions. The big difference was that Africa and Asia each received almost twice as many seats as the West in the horse-trading. This was a recipe for mischief, and the Bush administration made it worse by declining even to apply for membership.

In the three years since, hapless Western governments have been consistently outmaneuvered and outvoted on the council. They suffered a particularly serious reverse in March this year, when Islamic governments weakened a key UN inquiry into freedom of expression.

Even more damaging has been the steady erosion of independent "rapporteurs" who follow the record of individual governments. Their reports have long been the gold standard for international human rights monitoring, but such finger-pointing against individual governments could soon be a thing of the past.

The African bloc has insisted – successfully – that any country monitors be approved by the government under review, and the rapporteurs for Cuba, Belarus, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Liberia have all been retired. This means, incredibly, that the UN has no formal process for monitoring human rights in eastern Congo, which is in the throes of a deadly conflict. Many predict that the days may be numbered even for the UN's rapporteur on Sudan, which triggered the whole reform in the first place.

In place of these country inquiries, the council has established a process that is both bureaucratic and toothless. Known as the "Universal Periodic Review," it requires that all UN member governments submit to a three-hour review by the council every four years. This puts zero pressure on violators.

All of this represents a sweeping retreat from the 1990s, when 15 governments were subject to critical public appraisal by the UN. Country-specific inquiries may have unfairly penalized weak governments. But in this age of genocide, the pendulum has surely swung too far in the wrong direction.

Can the trend be reversed? Yes, but it will require vision. This should not be difficult. All governments understand that global challenges such as climate change and recession will put immense pressure on the weak and require a strong human rights response from the UN.

Such a vision will need a strategy. The US should start by courting moderate governments that feel obliged to vote with their regions but could probably be persuaded to support a less politicized approach. Many have greeted Obama's election with relief, but to take advantage of their goodwill, his team must propose a practical agenda instead of lamenting the council's shortcomings. This should start with a commitment to abide by international standards of behavior. There can be no more preaching human rights and practicing torture.

Second, the US should call for an overhaul of the Universal Periodic Review. It desperately needs independent oversight.

Finally, Obama and his nominee for UN Ambassador, Susan Rice, should appoint a delegate with a proven commitment to human rights. Such an agenda would require an investment in diplomatic capital. But it would also produce a huge return – for the US and for human rights.

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