



Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing

10 Years Later: **The Status of the United Nations Human Rights Council**

Tuesday, May 17, 2016
2:00 – 4:00 PM
2261 Rayburn House Office Building

Opening Remarks

Good afternoon.

I join my distinguished colleague and Co-Chairman of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, Rep. Joe Pitts, in welcoming all of you to today's hearing on the status of the UN Human Rights Council, ten years after its creation.

I would especially like to recognize Ambassador Keith Harper, our country's representative to the Human Rights Council. Ambassador, I know that your diplomatic skill was responsible for the excellent joint statement by the U.S. and eleven other countries on the human rights situation in China, delivered to the Human Rights Council last March; and for making possible the side event with Nobel laureates in which His Holiness the Dalai Lama spoke. Thank you for those initiatives.

It's been ten years since the United Nations General Assembly replaced the widely criticized UN Commission on Human Rights with a new body, the UN Human Rights Council. It's been seven years since President Obama reversed an initial policy of disengagement and decided to seek a seat on the Council, with the goal of shaping its development for the better. This past January, the U.S. completed two consecutive, very active terms on the Council. So now is a good moment to examine the impact of U.S. engagement on the Council itself and in relation to our national interests and values.

As we undertake this review, it is useful, first, to recall the breadth of the Council's mandate. It's supposed to promote universal respect for all human rights through education,

advisory services, technical assistance and capacity-building; address situations of violations of human rights, including gross and systematic violations; serve as a forum for dialogue on thematic rights issues; make recommendations to further develop human rights law; and contribute to the prevention of human rights violations, among other responsibilities. The brief is huge, and, of course, global.

Second, a serious examination of the state of the Council has to take into account the full range of activities of all of its mechanisms: the Universal Periodic Review or UPR, the Advisory Committee, the complaint procedures, and the special procedures, both thematic and country-specific, including country visits and reports, and commissions of inquiry. Quantitative analysis has its place, but it's not sufficient. I am interested in the qualitative impact of the Council's work.

Third, we should remember that only about 3.5 percent of the regular UN budget is allocated to all human rights activities, including the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights – a mere \$198 million out of the \$5.6 billion budget proposed for the 2016-2017 biennium. Of this amount, only about \$44 million over two years is destined for the Human Rights Council. This regular budget allocation is nowhere near enough to implement existing human rights mandates – it would fund less than half -- so the UN human rights system has to rely on additional voluntary contributions that may or may not materialize.

Human rights is supposed to be the third pillar of the UN system, alongside economic and social development, and peace and security. Looking at the numbers, that is simply not the case.

As an aside, “voluntary contributions” are like those our government provides to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Colombia. Not only do I believe these contributions should be increased, but I am angry that the U.S. is failing to provide the Office with sufficient funding right now, this year, forcing cuts in staff at a moment when the Office is already very necessary and may soon see a significant increase in its responsibilities, if a peace accord is signed and begins to be implemented. This is a classic case of nickel-and-diming human rights work, and I hope the Administration will provide more funding immediately to Colombia's UN Human Rights Office.

As Co-Chair of this Commission, I am constantly hearing about terrible human rights problems all over the world. Human rights violations are more likely to occur under authoritarian rule or in situations of armed conflict, but they can occur anywhere, including in our own country. Certainly our allies are not immune – consider the reports that regularly come out of Bahrain or Saudi Arabia. Since the Council was established, engagement and participation, especially in the UPR process, has exceeded expectations. Given the reality of today's world, and the fact that international human rights standards set the terms of the debate, we can only expect the demands on the UN human rights system to continue to increase.

I look forward to hearing from our witnesses on the achievements of the Human Rights Council, its limitations, the impact of U.S. engagement, and their recommendations as to how we in the Congress can contribute to continuing to strengthen the Council in the future. In light of the growing crackdown on civil society and human rights organizations around the world, I am especially interested in recommendations for guaranteeing and strengthening civil society participation, and for protecting the human rights defenders who do participate.

Thank you.