

## Background Note

### Human Rights Council elections on 12 May 2009

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The United Nations Human Rights Council (HRC) was established in 2006 to replace the former Commission on Human Rights. It has 47 members that are elected by secret ballot by the UN General Assembly. **Membership** is for three years and seats become vacant on a rotating basis. Eighteen seats are up for election on 12 May.

Seats on the Council are allocated according to regional representation (13 from Africa; 13 from Asia; 6 from Eastern Europe; 8 from Latin American and Caribbean; and 7 from Western States). Voluntary pledges to promote and uphold human rights are made by States on presenting their candidature for membership to the Council. These commitments are made public as General Assembly documents at the time of election (see [http://www.un.org/ga/63/elections/hrc\\_elections.shtml#candidates](http://www.un.org/ga/63/elections/hrc_elections.shtml#candidates) for States standing for the current election) and become part of the criteria by which the country's human rights record is assessed by the Council under its Universal Periodic Review (see below).

The Council meets throughout the year in Geneva. Its main sessions are held three times a year in March, June and September. Additional meetings are held to review urgent special human rights issues. So far 10 **special sessions** have been held on human rights issues relating to Myanmar, Darfur, Democratic Republic of Congo, Gaza and the West Bank, the effects of the global financial crisis and the effects of the world food crisis, among other issues.

Through a new mechanism, the **Universal Periodic Review (UPR)**, the Council has begun to assess the human rights situation in every UN Member State. By the end of its current UPR session ending 15 May, the Council will have scrutinized 80 countries. By the end of 2011, all 192 Member States will have had a first periodic review and the second cycle will begin. Only after the second periodic review will it be possible to tell what sort of impact has been made on the human rights situation in individual countries. So far, the experience has been largely positive, with a strong commitment on the part of both governments and non-governmental participants. Information used for the review comes from many sources: civil society groups, national human rights organizations, the eight human rights treaty bodies, Special Rapporteurs and other experts, as well as the government concerned. The sharing of best practices is an important aspect of the review process. All meetings are open and public, as are the recommendations and other documents.

Civil society plays an important role and has an impact on the Council's work that is perhaps unparalleled in any other international forum. Hundreds of non-governmental participants from all over the world attend each meeting, participate in the decision-making process, make proposals and channel their comments, concerns and grievances.

An important aspect of the Council's work is setting international human rights standards. In the short three years of its existence, the Council has established standards relating to disappearances (Conventions), indigenous rights (a Declaration) and an Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, among others. This is complemented by increased attention to thematic issues through the holding of panel discussions on, for example, the human rights of women, climate change, missing persons, and the rights of children.

**Special Procedures** enable the Council to appoint an independent expert, often called a Special Rapporteur, or working group to investigate human rights abuses in a particular country or on a particular thematic issue and publicly report on it. The Council inherited a number of these special procedures from the previous Human Rights Commission. The Council has reviewed all these mandates, which encompass a vast range of human rights concerns, from arbitrary detention, disappearances and executions to the sale of children, extreme poverty and freedom of expression. The Council has continued all the thematic mandates and has established some new ones, namely on contemporary forms of slavery and access to safe drinking water and sanitation. Most country mandates were also extended. Currently there are eight country and 30 thematic special procedures. The full list of thematic issues can be found at:

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/chr/special/themes.htm>

The list of country mandates can be found at:

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/chr/special/countries.htm>

A confidential **complaints** procedure allows individuals and organizations to bring complaints about gross and reliably attested violations of human rights to the attention of the Council.

The Council has an **Advisory Committee** of 18 elected experts that functions as a think tank, providing expertise and advice to the Council. The Advisory Committee conducts substantive research and studies on thematic issues of interest to the Council, at its request.

Additional mechanisms have been created by the Council to provide it with advice on indigenous peoples and minorities. An expert group on the rights of **indigenous peoples** has been created by the Council, as well as a **Forum on Minority Issues**, which meets once a year as a platform for promoting dialogue and cooperation on issues relating to national or ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities. The next meeting is in November 2009 to discuss minorities and political participation. A third mechanism, the **Social Forum**, is an interactive dialogue between the United Nations human rights machinery and various stakeholders, including grassroots organizations, to promote social cohesion based on the principles of social justice, equity and solidarity, as well as to address the social dimension and challenges of globalization. The most recent meeting, in September 2008, focused on poverty.

Although the Council is small and not universal in nature, it is gaining in respect and effectiveness. Whatever its flaws and shortcomings, it is the only international human rights body mandated to scrutinize human rights in every country.

## Details concerning the 12 May elections

The Human Rights Council has 47 members that serve for a period of three years and are not eligible for immediate re-election after two consecutive terms. Election is by secret ballot of the General Assembly.

18 seats are vacant, 20 countries are standing for election

14 countries are looking for re-election

6 countries are new candidates: Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Hungary, Belgium, Norway, USA

4 countries are not standing for re-election: Canada, Germany, Malaysia, Switzerland

### **Africa (5 seats)**

\* Cameroon  
\* Djibouti  
\* Kenya  
\* Mauritius  
Nigeria  
\* Senegal

### **Asia (5 seats)**

Bangladesh  
\* China  
\* Jordan  
Kyrgyzstan  
Saudi Arabia

### **Eastern Europe (2 seats)**

\* Azerbaijan  
\* Hungary  
\* Russia

### **Latin America & Caribbean (3 seats)**

\* Cuba  
\* Mexico  
\* Uruguay

### **Western European & Others (3 seats)**

\* Belgium  
\* Norway  
\* USA

\* indicates that country has submitted voluntary pledges in support of its candidacy. These pledges are issued as official General Assembly documents and can be found at:

[http://www.un.org/ga/63/elections/hrc\\_elections.shtml](http://www.un.org/ga/63/elections/hrc_elections.shtml)

Information about the Human Rights Council can be found at:

<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/>

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Information note is for media only. Not an official record.

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