

Human Rights  
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# US shocked over losing UNHRC

WASHINGTON—Just unbelievable, that the very champion of the world Human Rights will be shown the door from the world Human Rights body. For the first time in the history of the UN, in over 50 years, the US was voted off the United Nations Human Rights Commission.

With just 29 votes, the United States came in last in a race for three seats on the panel, losing to France, Austria, and Sweden. The outcome stunned activists and legislators on Capitol Hill.

The unprecedented defeat suggested that the United States has lost support among its allies, as well. The defeat sends a signal to US leaders about growing unease around the world, specially so when nations such as Syria, Sudan, and Sierra Leone, widely condemned for human rights violations, held onto their seats.

"It's very important symbolically, and it may serve as a wakeup call," said Joanna Weschler, the UN representative of Human Rights Watch. Representative Robert Menendez, a New Jersey Democrat who sits on the House sub-committee that oversees hu-

man rights and United Nations issues, said: "The Bush administration obviously either didn't take this seriously or didn't pay attention, in understanding that the drums have been beating about US unilateral decisions for some time."

Senator John F. Kerry, Democrat from Massachusetts, called the move a "slap in the face, and a very strong message to the United States about its role in the world."

The ouster left the United States without a formal role on the chief human rights panel at the UN, without the bully pulpit it has used to denounce abuses abroad. Several specialists said they expect certain causes historically championed by the United States, including resolutions criticizing China's human rights practices, to fall by the wayside.

On the other hand, American officials and lawmakers showed

anger and indignation that the United States had lost its traditional seat and leadership on the United Nations Human Rights Commission.

The State Department issued a statement saying it was "greatly disappointed in the outcome of the vote." The Human Rights Commission remains an important forum but would be diminished by the absence of the United States, the statement said. "Our commitment and resolve to address human rights problems around the world is a matter of U.S. policy; it will not be affected by this vote."

In Congress, leaders from both parties expressed outrage, reports *The New York Times*, that nations whose records have long been criticized by the United States apparently banded together with European nations to quell Washington's voice.

A spokesman for the House Speaker, J. Dennis Hastert, said "today's action" might force lawmakers to reconsider a carefully wrought agreement worked out between the Senate and the Clinton administration to pay outstanding American dues to the United Nations. The House is expected to take up the issue for the first time next week as part of the State Department authorization bill. "This really hurts the credibility of the U.N. in the Congress," said Mr. Hastert's spokesman.

Although the vote of the Economic and Social Council, which has authority over the Human Rights Commission, was carried out by secret ballot, lawmakers speculated that nations like Cuba and China — both annual targets of American criticism — had conducted behind-the-scenes lobbying against Washington. Others pointed to the unraveling of an

understanding with Europe that the United States would retain one of the three seats reserved for Western nations.

"This is a deliberate attempt to punish the United States for its insistence that the commission tell the truth about human rights abuses wherever they occur," said Representative Henry J. Hyde, Republican of Illinois and the Chairman of the House International Relations Committee. "This Commission includes some of the world's premier human rights violators."

Representative Tom Lantos, a California Democrat who is the Co-chairman of the Congressional Human Rights Caucus, said, "It is absurd that rogue states and chronic human rights abusers such as Libya, Sudan and Cuba remain on the commission and sit in judgment on the human rights practices of others while the United

States now stands on the sidelines."

Senator Jesse Helms, the North Carolina Republican who, as Chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, was a major architect of the agreement to end the United States' arrears, said it came as "no surprise that a few European countries maneuvered, in a secret vote, to eliminate the United States from the United Nations Human Rights Commission."

Jeane J. Kirkpatrick, a former American ambassador to the United Nations, said the administration's failure so far to place a diplomat in her old post, had left the United States vulnerable to diplomatic ambushes. "Somebody wasn't watching the store," Dr. Kirkpatrick said. Without the leadership of an ambassador, she said, there is an atmosphere in which "no one is responsible."

Representative Christopher H.

# seat

Smith, Republican of New Jersey and a senior member of the House human rights panel, said he anticipated "serious, serious credibility problems for the Commission itself."

However, behind the scenes efforts are being made that one of the elected member vacates its seat to accommodate the U.S. on the HRC. The chairwoman of that committee, Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, Republican from Florida, issued a statement calling the vote "a travesty that undermines the integrity and legitimacy of the United Nations system."

It was with such concerns in mind that William H. Luers, head of the United Nations Association of the United States, called on one of the countries elected to the Commission to step aside so that the United States could take its place. "A diplomatic solution must be found immediately," Luers said. "Given America's energetic lead-

ership in the promotion of human rights, the US absence from the Commission would severely damage the commission's effectiveness and credibility."

Yet the immediate fallout from the vote was almost certain to be in US domestic politics. It set the stage for a familiar Capitol Hill debate on whether the United States should pay its UN dues, or participate in the UN.

Why the US lost? Some analysts viewed the vote as a response to the administration's positions on a number of issues - from a treaty on land mines to the International Criminal Court - that have drawn criticism, especially in Europe. The fact that three European nations - France, Sweden and Austria - secured the Western seats signaled a snub of Washington by the European Union. But others said the Economic and Social Council was heavily weighted toward developing nations that resent the United States' annual criticism against other nations or fear such scrutiny themselves.

In any case damage is done and it is a major setback for the Bush administration and a lesson to learn.