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Nikki Haley

On U.S. Withdrawal from the United Nations Human Rights Council

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[AUTHENTICITY CERTIFIED: Text version below transcribed directly from audio]

Thank you. Good afternoon.

I want to thank Secretary [Mike] Pompeo for his friendship and his partnership and his leadership as we move forward on these issues.

One year ago, I traveled to the United Nations Human Rights Council in Geneva. On that occasion, I outlined the U.S. priorities for advancing human rights and I declared our intent to remain a part of the Human Rights Council -- if essential reforms were achieved. These reforms were needed in order to make the council a serious advocate for human rights. For too long, the Human Rights Council has been a protector of human rights abusers and a cesspool of political bias.

Regrettably, it is now clear that our call for reform was not heeded. Human rights abusers continue to serve on and be elected to the council. The world's most inhumane regimes continue to escape scrutiny, and the council continues politicizing and scapegoating of countries with positive human rights records in an attempt to distract from the abusers in their ranks.



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Therefore, as we said we would do a year ago if we did not see any progress, the United States is officially withdrawing from the UN Human Rights Council. In doing so, I want to make it crystal clear that this step is not a retreat from human rights commitments; on the contrary, we take this step because our commitment does not allow us to remain a part of a hypocritical and self-serving organization that makes a mockery of human rights.

We did not make this decision lightly. When this Administration began 17 months ago, we were well aware of the enormous flaws in the Human Rights Council. We could have withdrawn immediately. We did not do that.

Instead, we made a good-faith effort to resolve the problems. We met with ambassadors of over a dozen countries in Geneva. Last September, in President Trump's speech before the UN General Assembly, he called for member-states to support Human Rights Council reform. During High-Level Week last year, we'd led a session on Human Rights Council reform co-hosted by the British and Dutch foreign ministers, and more than 40 other countries.

Our efforts continued all through this year in New York, where my team met with more than 125 member-states and circulated draft texts. Almost every country we met with agrees with us in principle and behind closed doors that the Human Rights Council needs major, dramatic, systemic changes; yet no other country has had the courage to join our fight.

Meanwhile, the situation on the council has gotten worse, not better. One of our central goals was to prevent the world's worst human rights abusers from gaining Human Rights Council membership. What happened? In the past year, the Democratic Republic of Congo was elected as a member. The DRC is widely known to have one of the worst human rights records in the world. Even as it was being elected to membership in the Human Rights Council, mass graves continued to be discovered in the Congo.

Another of our goals was to stop the council from protecting the world's worst human rights abusers. What happened? The council would not even have a meeting on the human rights conditions in Venezuela. Why? Because Venezuela is a member of the Human Rights Council, as is Cuba, as is China.

Similarly, the council failed to respond in December and January when the Iranian regime killed and arrested hundreds of citizens simply for expressing their views.



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When a so-called Human Rights Council cannot bring itself to address the massive abuses in Venezuela and Iran, and it welcomes the Democratic Republic of Congo as a new member, the council ceases to be worthy of its name. Such a council, in fact, damages the cause of human rights.

And then, of course, there is the matter of the chronic bias against Israel. Last year, the United States made it clear that we would not accept the continued existence of Agenda Item 7,¹ which singles out Israel in a way that no other country is singled out. Earlier -- Earlier this year, as it has in previous years, the Human Rights Council passed five resolutions against Israel -- more than the number passed against North Korea, Iran, and Syria combined. This disproportionate focus and unending hostility towards Israel is clear proof that the council is motivated by political bias, not by human rights.

For all these reasons, the United States spent the past year engaged in a sincere effort to reform the Human Rights Council. It is worth examining why our efforts didn't succeed. At its core, there are two reasons. First, there are many unfree countries that simply do not want the council to be effective. A credible human rights council poses a real threat to them, so they opposed the steps that would create it.

Look at the council membership and you see an appalling disrespect for the most basic human rights. These countries strongly resist any effort to expose their abusive practices. In fact, that's why many of them run for a seat on the Human Rights Council in the first place: to protect themselves from scrutiny. When we made it clear we would strongly pursue council reform, these countries came out of the woodwork to oppose it: Russia, China, Cuba, and Egypt all attempted to undermine our reform efforts this past year.

The second reason our reforms didn't succeed is in some ways even more frustrating. There are several countries on the Human Rights Council who do share our values. Many of them strongly urged us to remain engaged in the council. They are embarrassed by the obsessive mistreatment of Israel. They share our alarm with the hypocrisy of countries like Cuba, Venezuela, Democratic Republic of Congo, and others serving on the council.

Ultimately, however, many of these like-minded countries were unwilling to seriously challenge the status quo. We gave them opportunity after opportunity and many months of consultations, and yet they would not take a stand unless it was behind closed doors.



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Some even admittedly were fine with the blatant flaws of the council as long as they could pursue their own narrow agenda within the current structure.

We didn't agree with such a moral compromise when the previous UN Human Rights Commission was disbanded in 2006, and we don't agree with it now. Many of these countries argued that the United States should stay on the Human Rights Council because American participation is the last shred of credibility that the council has. But that is precisely why we must leave. If the Human Rights Council is going to attack countries that uphold human rights and shield countries that abuse human rights, then America should not provide it with any credibility. Instead, we will continue to lead on human rights outside the misnamed Human Rights Council.

Last year, during the United States presidency of the Security Council, we initiated the first ever Security Council session dedicated to the connection between human rights and peace and security. Despite protests and prohibitions, we did organize an event on Venezuela outside the Human Rights Council chambers in Geneva. And this past January, we did have a Security Council session on Iranian human rights in New York.

I have traveled to the -- to UN refugee and internally displaced persons camps in Ethiopia, Congo, Turkey, and Jordan, and met with the victims of atrocities in those troubled regions. We have used America's voice and vote to defend human rights at the UN every day, and we will continue to do so. Even as we end our membership in the Human Rights Council, we will keep trying to strengthen the entire framework of the UN engagement on human rights issues, and we will continue to strongly advocate for reform of the Human Rights Council. Should it become reformed, we would be happy to rejoin it.

America has a proud legacy as a champion of human rights, a proud legacy as the world's largest provider of humanitarian aid, and a proud legacy of liberating oppressed people and defeating tyranny throughout the world. While we do not seek to impose the American system on anyone else, we do support the rights of all people to have freedoms bestowed on them by their Creator. That is why we are withdrawing from the UN Human Rights Council, an organization that is not worthy of its name.

Thank you.



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¹ "Item 7. Human rights situation in Palestine and other occupied Arab territories" [Source: <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/325B5DF6ABBFBF268525734100634561>]