

The Washington Post

US submits to UN human rights review

By COLLEEN BARRY

The Associated Press

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GENEVA -- The United States is submitting its human rights record to the scrutiny of other nations - both allies and adversaries - for the first time, as the Obama administration opens itself up to a committee shunned by his predecessor.

The three-hour U.N. review Friday will have more than a few uncomfortable moments for the high-level U.S. delegation, which is sure to face questions over the use of torture in the war on terror, not dismantling the prison at Guantanamo Bay, the death penalty, immigration policy, the treatment of racial minorities and questions of religious freedom.

The 30-strong delegation, headed by three top State Department officials and including representatives from many departments, including Justice, Defense and Homeland Security, arrives in Geneva with a 20-page report compiled with the input of civic and social organizations.

For most observers, the high level of U.S. engagement alone is a milestone. The Bush administration shunned the U.N. Human Rights Council, which runs the so-called Universal Public Reviews, because of the participation of repressive states and its constant criticism of Israel.

Some of the most vocal critics of the review process have come from the U.S. Congress, and a landslide by the frequently U.N.-skeptical Republicans in Tuesday's election could leave the country even less receptive.

Human rights organizations say the ultimate test will be in the U.S. response to peer recommendations from any of the United Nations 192 members, including possibly Iran, which will be made next week.

Jamil Dakwar, director of the ACLU human rights program, said it is important that the United States matches its rhetoric with concrete domestic policies and actions.

"We believe that Obama administration should take specific actions through executive order and legislation that assure domestic human rights commitments, including UPR recommendations, are

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monitored and enforced within the U.S.," Dakwar said.

Some activists say Washington's report glosses over some of the toughest human rights challenges facing the United States, including the treatment of immigrants, the death penalty and officials responsible for the use of torture as a tool in the war against terror.

"We were dissatisfied because we concluded half of the report was basically fluff. It had very little substance," said Ajamu Baraka, director of the US Human Rights Network, a coalition of non-governmental organizations that prepared its own human rights reports in parallel. "It devoted too much space to a rendering of U.S. history as it relates to human rights that we thought was primarily myth."

Beyond front-page issues like torture and immigration, Baraka also wants to see the United States make more progress in what are seen as softer economic, social and cultural human rights, areas that came into sharp focus by the economic collapse that has penalized mostly less powerful members of society.

The 47-member council replaced the discredited Human Rights Commission in 2006, and the Obama administration joined last year - although as a U.N. member would have been required to participate in the peer review in any case. The council has no

enforcement powers, but is supposed to act as the world's moral conscience on human rights.

The best tool it has for that is the UPR process, under which it reviews all of the 192 U.N. members' human rights records every four years. It is currently about two-thirds into the first cycle, which will be completed at the end of 2011.

The review will also be a test for the council itself, as governments assess next year whether the young body is living up to its stated purpose to be the world's pre-eminent forum for discussing human rights.

Critics of the council have argued that too often repressive states such as Cuba and Pakistan have used the review process to lavish praise on their allies, a practice the U.S. recently suggested should be banned in future meetings.

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The process has its detractors across the Atlantic who don't want to see the United States submit to the scrutiny of countries with lesser human rights records. Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer, for example, called it "internationalism run amok," complaining that the state's controversial immigration law was included in the report. She asked it be removed; it was not.

Indeed, it is highly likely that countries like Iran - whose human rights record is often under fire from Washington - will jockey to be the first to question the United States. But U.S. officials say such scrutiny does not weaken the process.

"We will get some interesting questions. We will get some outrageous questions. The United State is used to public scrutiny," Eileen Chamberlain Donahoe, U.S. Ambassador to the Human Rights Council told a briefing Wednesday.

Donahoe said the United States needs to be willing to hear criticism also from its critics in order to be good role model.

"We genuinely believe that it is through that kind of open process, that the truth about our human rights record will shine through, number one, and the areas where we need to improve will benefit from the real and serious input that we get," she said.

The U.S. report acknowledges areas where problems persist, including discrimination

against Hispanics and African Americans, unemployment rates of up to 80 percent on some Native American reservations and a "broken" immigration system. But it emphasizes that participating in the review does not place the United States at the same level as countries that systematically abuse human rights.

"There is no comparison between American democracy and repressive regimes," the report says.

Donahoe said she hoped that Tuesday's elections, which gave control of the House to the Republicans, who are generally more wary of the U.N., would have little bearing on the U.S. engagement with the global body over the longer term.

"I feel fairly confident we are starting to change the understanding at home about the value of the opportunity that we have here, that engagement has its benefits," Donahoe

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Cuba, Iran blast U.S. human rights at U.N. forum

05 Nov 2010 10:33:50 GMT

Source: Reuters

* Foes from Cuba to Iran attack U.S. record on human rights

* UN Human Rights Council holds first review of America

* U.S. defends record, says does not practice torture

By Stephanie Nebehay

GENEVA, Nov 5 (Reuters) - The United States defended its human rights record on Friday from criticism from foes including Cuba and Iran, who called for it to close Guantanamo prison and investigate alleged torture by its troops abroad.

A U.S. delegation also heard demands for an end to discrimination against minorities and immigrants and a banning of the death penalty.

The debate took place in the United Nations Human Rights Council, which is gradually reviewing the performance of all 192 U.N. member states.

"While we are proud of our achievements, we are not satisfied with the status quo. We will continue to work to ensure that our laws are fair and justly implemented," Michael Posner, assistant U.S. secretary of state for democracy, human rights and labor, told the Geneva forum.

But diplomats from countries at odds with Washington -- some of whom queued overnight to be among the first on the speakers' list -- hammered the U.S. delegation for alleged abuses.

Cuban ambassador Rodolfo Reyes Rodriguez spoke first, calling on Washington to end the blockade on his island country and respect the Cuban people's right to self-determination.

Venezuela's envoy German Mundarain Hernandez said it should "close Guantanamo and secret detention centres around the world, punish those people who torture, disappear and execute detainees arbitrarily and provide compensation to victims".

Iran's delegation urged the United States to "halt serious violations of human rights and humanitarian law including covert external operations by the CIA carried out on pretext of combating terrorism".

Harold Koh, State Department legal adviser, said the Obama administration had begun by "turning the page" on Bush-era practices and fully ensured humane treatment of detainees.

"Let there be no doubt, the United States does not torture and it will not torture," Koh declared.

"President Obama has clearly and unequivocally ordered and remains committed to the closure of Guantanamo as a facility. While that commitment has not wavered, the task is enormously complex," said Koh, a former dean of Yale University law school.

Closing the U.S. detention facility in southeastern Cuba, which now holds 174 security detainees, required help from America's allies and the U.S. courts and Congress, he said.

The United States submitted a 29-page report to the 47-member forum listing achievements and conceding shortcomings.

"Freedoms of speech, assembly, thought and conscience and religion remain vigorously respected," Posner said on Friday.

"We have expansive legal protection against unfair discrimination and in the last half century have made significant progress in ensuring that the law protects equal opportunities for all Americans in areas such as education, employment, health, and voting."



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