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Remarks Before the High-Level Session of the Human Rights Council
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Check Against Delivery

Thank you, Mr. President.

It is indeed an honor and a privilege to address the Council today on this important occasion for my country.

The United States is pleased to join the rest of our colleagues on the Human Rights Council. It is with a sense of mutual respect that we take our place on the Council, next to the friends and partners we will work with to forge common ground on one of the most fundamental roles of the state: to protect and advance human rights.

The charge of the Human Rights Council ties closely to the United States' own history and culture.

Freedom of speech, expression and belief. Due process. Equal rights for all. These enduring principles have animated some of the proudest moments in America's journey. These human rights and fundamental freedoms are, in effect, a part of our national DNA, just as they are a part of the DNA of the United Nations.

And yet, we recognize that the United States' record on human rights is imperfect. Our history includes lapses and setbacks, and there remains a great deal of work to be done.

But our history is a story of progress. Indeed, my presence here today is a testament to that progress, as is the Administration I serve. It is the President's hope and my own that we can continue that momentum at home and around the world.

Our decision to join the Human Rights Council was not entered into lightly, and was reached based on a clear and hopeful vision of what can be accomplished here. Our vision is not merely made in America, but rather reflects the aspirations embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the mandate of the Human Rights Council itself.

Building on those bedrock foundations, the United States' aspirations for the Human Rights Council encompass several key themes.

The first is universality. Last year we celebrated the 60th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.



The principles contained there are as resonant today as they were when Eleanor Roosevelt led the Commission that enshrined them. We can not pick and choose which of these rights we embrace nor select who among us are entitled to them. We are all endowed at birth with the right to live in dignity, to follow our consciences and speak our minds without fear, to choose those who govern us, to hold our leaders accountable, and to enjoy equal justice under the law. These rights extend to all, and the United States can not accept that any among us would be condemned to live without them.

The second is dialogue. The Human Rights Council is unique in its ability to draw together countries for serious, fact-based and forward looking debate on human rights abuses. We will strive for discussions that are thoughtful, focused and open to all viewpoints and perspectives. Geneva is the place for this critical dialogue, and the United States will be an active and constructive participant. This dialogue is a long-term proposition. We will not resolve our differences overnight, nor end abuses with the wave of a hand or even the passage of a resolution. Creativity, flexibility and sensitivity will be demanded all around. We approach this mindful of the long-haul, ready to devote the time it takes to build understanding and shared will to act.

The third is principle. We have come together as Human Rights Council members on the basis of shared principles. Our challenge lies in taking these principles - reflected in the Universal Declaration and many other broad based human rights instruments - and applying them in an even-handed way to situations that defy easy resolution. Defending our core principles from compromise and applying them fairly under all circumstances will require steadfastness and courage from all of us.

The fourth is truth. Make no mistake; the United States will not look the other way in the face of serious human rights abuses. The truth must be told, the facts brought to light and the consequences faced. While we will aim for common ground, we will call things as we see them and we will stand our ground when the truth is at stake.

These four principles – universality, dialogue, principle and truth – will guide us as we turn attention to a series of key issues in the coming months.

The United States will work with others to address the most egregious human rights abuses at the Council. The United States is inspired by the impassioned demands of human rights defenders under siege around the world who look to us and to the Council for action. We are also motivated by the pernicious machinations of countries seeking to obscure and deny their abuses. Country-specific resolutions demonstrate our collective will to address some of the most important human rights situations around the world. They provide space for human rights defenders to carry out their valiant work and, through the work of the mandate holders, offer monitoring mechanisms and recommendations that can guide reform. We urge states to support the independence of human rights special procedures as vital resources in the fight for human rights.

As President Obama expressed in his June speech in Cairo, the United States seeks to build cooperation based upon mutual interest and mutual respect. To that end, the United States is dedicated to working with other nations who share our commitment to protecting freedom of expression and fighting against discrimination and negative stereotyping. The HRC is designed to offer a forum for governments to address difficult issues, and it is vitally important that we find ways to work together on these themes. The United States believes that governments have a responsibility to condemn hateful speech and to promote respect and tolerance. We also believe fundamentally that the best way to fight intolerance and hate is through open and free debate and discussion of ideas - in such an open environment hateful and racist remarks are held up to bright light of public scrutiny and seen for the scourge they are.

We will ask others to stand with us in supporting the work of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, whose stature makes her an indispensable voice on human rights issues worldwide. The United States is proud to be the OHCHR's top donor. The OHCHR, working through its local and regional offices, serves as an "early warning system" ringing alarm bells to draw attention to human rights abuses. The United States is dedicated to ensuring the operational independence of the OHCHR and will continue to support its technical assistance activities across the globe.

As the United States seeks to advance human rights and fundamental freedoms across the globe, we embrace a commitment to live up to these ideals at home and to meet our international human rights obligations. Along these lines, the United States looks forward to our upcoming UPR process, which is an opportunity for both self-reflection and transparency. We anticipate a thought-provoking process with our colleagues on the Council and in civil society that culminates in a review that demonstrates progress as well as areas of unfulfilled potential.

Finally, we will join with you to reinforce the importance of accountability and good governance within the Council, ensuring that our own operations and deliberations reflect the values we are entrusted to uphold. And we will seek to enhance the Council's impact through a productive and effective review of the Council in 2011. We hope others will join us in approaching that process mindful of our shared principles but open to creative new approaches.

International peace and security and global prosperity are strengthened when human rights and fundamental freedoms are respected and protected. We recognize and value the importance of this institution in promoting human rights norms and rallying our collective will to address human rights abuses where they occur.

To this end, we have set a goal for this Council as elusive as it is simple. Progress. It is the same goal that my countrymen and women set for ourselves, and it is the same goal that we continue to hold ourselves to today. It is also, I believe, the most basic expression of what we all hope for in this Council today and going forward.

So, to that end, let us endeavor to end this session with a more strengthened and robust human rights mechanism than we had before we gathered here today.

Thank you.

