

Cuba celebrates its place on U.N. rights council

Cuba cheered its election to the new U.N. Human Rights Council and promptly criticized the United States, which refused to join.

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GENEVA - Cuba on Tuesday welcomed the opening of the new U.N. Human Rights Council, praising its own election as a founding member of the 47-nation body and the exclusion of the United States, which declined to stand as a candidate.

Cuba -- which has been criticized by the United States and rights groups for its record -- said its victory in the May election was a reward for its humanitarian work, including work by its doctors in 70 other countries and free surgery by Cuban eye specialists for patients from elsewhere in the Caribbean and Latin America.

"Today is a particularly symbolic day. Cuba is a founding member of the Human Rights Council and the United States is not," Foreign Minister Felipe Pérez Roque said. "The absence of the United States is the defeat of lies; it is the moral punishment for the haughtiness of an empire."

Velia de Pirro, political counselor at the U.S. Mission, dismissed Cuba's comments.

"Cuba, rather than explain how it intends to comply with its pledge, chose instead to engage in gratuitous and unfounded attacks against the United States," Pirro said. "Perhaps it is because those pledges sound hollow, especially in the ears of the Cuban people."

The United States opposed the creation of the council, saying it did not do enough to improve upon the discredited Human Rights Commission that preceded it, and it declined to run for a seat. However, Washington has promised to help the council succeed.

The Cuban foreign minister said the election of council members came at a time when the United States was conducting "an unjust and illegal" war in Iraq that was "concocted to steal a country's oil and give away sumptuous contracts to a group of cronies of the president."

Japan, Canada, Finland and Switzerland were also among those chosen to sit on the 47-nation body.

The first meeting of the council runs through June 30.

Human rights groups say they are still concerned about the makeup of the new council.

Cuba, Saudi Arabia, China and Russia won seats, despite their poor human rights records, although others -- notably Iran -- were defeated.