

THE OPPENHEIMER REPORT

U.N. Human Rights Council is little more than a bad joke

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There wasn't much to celebrate on International Human Rights Day earlier this week. There is growing evidence that a recently created United Nations Human Rights Council that many hoped would step up international scrutiny of rights abusers worldwide has turned out to be a fiasco.

So much so that, as I learned in a telephone interview with Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., on Wednesday, most Democrats and Republicans -- who cannot agree on almost anything these days -- are supporting a bill that would withhold about \$3 million in U.S. annual contributions to the United Nations to protest the council's performance.

"You shouldn't have human rights abusers on a human rights committee, and that's what we have, with countries such as Angola and Cuba," Reid told me. He added that "we have a better than 50-50 chance" to pass the bill that would cut U.S. funds for the council.

The 47-member council was created in 2006 after several years of discussions to replace the widely discredited U.N. Human Rights Commission, which had turned into a sort of mutual protection club of some of the world's worst dictatorships. But the council is hardly an improvement.

Since its creation, it has spent virtually all its energies in condemning Israel, while failing to issue similar warnings about human rights violations in North Korea, Zimbabwe and dozens of other countries. What's more, the council has closed down its offices to monitor abuses in Cuba and Belarus.

The council has issued 13 condemnations, of which 12 have been against Israel, and one against Burma. Most rights advocates agree that while Israel should be subject to close scrutiny, the council has become a largely one-issue body. And even when it comes to Israel, the council's rulings have failed to include Palestinian acts of terrorism against Israeli civilians in its condemnations.

"We are quite disappointed," says Peggy Hicks, of Human Rights Watch, a group that denounces abuses in dozens of countries, including the United States. "The council has engaged in a very limited agenda and hasn't taken up a number of human rights issues that ought to be addressed."

There are at least 26 countries that deserve the council's attention, according to Human Rights Watch. They include Afghanistan, Belarus, China, Colombia, Ivory Coast, Cuba, Democratic Republic of Congo, Egypt, Ethiopia, Haiti, Iran, Iraq, North Korea, Russia,

Saudi Arabia, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uganda, the United States, Uzbekistan and Zimbabwe.

"The council is far worse than the [now defunct] Commission," says Hillel Neuer, director of U.N. Watch, a Geneva-based group affiliated with the American Jewish Committee. "The Commission, despite its many defects, at least had managed to speak out for victims in North Korea, Cuba and other countries."

Most international human rights groups don't go as far as saying that the council is worse than its predecessor because the new body includes more democracies than the former Commission.

But it still has dozens of members with dubious human rights credentials -- such as China, Cuba and Saudi Arabia -- that trade their positions in other U.N. agencies for seats on the council and then defend one another against outside scrutiny, they say.

The United States is not a member of the council because the Bush administration decided not to seek a seat. U.S. officials say the White House didn't want to legitimize the council, while critics point out that the United States may not have gotten the 96 votes it needed at the General Assembly to become a member in the aftermath of the Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo scandals.

Despite their criticism of the council, Human Rights Watch and other international monitoring groups are still holding out some hope that the U.N. body will redeem itself once its newly created mechanism of "universal periodic review" goes into effect in 2008. Under the new system, every U.N. member state has to undergo scrutiny by the council every four years.

My opinion: If the council doesn't start to denounce human rights abuses in China, Cuba, North Korea -- and, yes, at the U.S. Guantánamo base and in Iraq -- when it launches its periodic review mechanism next year, international human rights groups should jointly denounce it as a sham. So far, it has been a joke.