

UN Veto Reveals Bush Administration's Contempt for Human Rights

By Stephen Zunes

The U.S. veto of a UN Security Council resolution calling for the deployment of unarmed monitors to the Israeli-occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip demonstrates the new administration's contempt for human rights. The United States was the only country to vote against the resolution, which came before the Security Council on March 28 after five days of tortuous negotiations that moderated the wording of the original draft. Still, this was not enough for the U.S., which vetoed its first UN Security Council resolution in five years.

The call for international monitors has grown over the past six months as reports by Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Israeli group B'tselem have documented a pattern of gross and systematic human rights violations by Israeli occupation forces against the Palestinian population. These have included detention without charge, torture, extrajudicial killings, rocket and mortar attacks against civilian targets, demolition of Palestinian homes, restrictions of movement, and numerous acts of collective punishment.

Bush administration officials claim that monitors should not be deployed without Israel's consent. However, the monitors would not be going to Israel. Instead they would be assigned to Israeli-occupied Palestinian territory and areas controlled by the Palestinian Authority, so no Israeli consent is required. The recently vetoed UN resolution did not call for a peace-keeping force but rather for a team of monitors to observe and report on human rights abuses.

Although claims and counterclaims have been made by the propaganda machinery on both sides of the issue, providing an internationally sanctioned, neutral monitoring group was a very modest proposal. It could have shed some

light on the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict and could have served as a deterrent against further violence and repression. The U.S. veto raises the question: What does the Bush administration fear about what such a monitoring group might reveal?

Perhaps there was concern that the monitors might note how U.S. military hardware—ostensibly sent to Israel for that country's legitimate security needs—was actually being used for attacks against civilians. Perhaps there was fear of raising awareness that U.S. arms sent to Israel—like U.S. arms sent to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, Morocco, and other Middle Eastern allies of the United States—are not furthering peace and security, but rather are promoting violence and repression. These arms shipments to repressive governments in the Middle East bring in billions of dollars to American arms exporters, which would be in jeopardy if human rights considerations were taken into account. Whatever the reason, the veto has put the U.S. government at odds with almost the entire international community.

It's particularly disappointing to human rights activists that most congressional Democrats have declined to criticize the Republican administration's action at the UN. Even members of the Human Rights Caucus in the House of Representatives have not questioned the veto. With no pressure coming from Capitol Hill, the Bush administration will have little incentive to change its anti-human rights stance in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Wednesday's veto may be just the beginning of the Bush administration's efforts to restrict UN efforts to defend human rights. President George W. Bush's appointee as U.S. representative to the United Nations is John Negroponte

who, as ambassador to Honduras during the 1980s, covered up widespread human rights abuses by U.S.-trained Honduran army units, and withheld from Congress evidence of large-scale human rights violations by the U.S.-backed government.

Public opinion polls indicate that the vast majority of Americans believe that human rights are important and should be a major focus of U.S. foreign policy, even if the perpetrator of human rights violations is an impor-

tant U.S. ally. Thus far, however, as with popular concerns about the environment, the Bush administration appears quite willing to ignore the sentiments of the American public.

It will be very difficult for the United States to speak out against human rights abuses in Iraq, Iran, China, or any other country as long as it protects its allies from international criticism or scrutiny. Global leadership requires that principles

sometimes must be placed above ideology. Otherwise, the United States will find itself with fewer friends and a growing number of enemies in an increasingly violent world.

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