

U.S. Arrogance on Display in UN Human Rights Commission Flap

By Stephen Zunes

The decision by the U.S. Congress to withhold \$244 million in dues owed to the United Nations only builds upon the growing global perception of U.S. arrogance. In recent days, both Democrats and Republicans on Capitol Hill have placed themselves to the right of even the Bush administration in their sharp anti-UN rhetoric.

The reason for the congressional displeasure is the recent vote of the UN Human Rights Commission in which three European countries were elected to the three slots reserved for Western industrialized nations. It is the first time since the commission's founding in 1947 that the United States was not elected. Despite some reports to the contrary, countries like China, Libya, and Sudan did not defeat the United States in a head-to-head context. Each country is elected by region. Our allies, therefore, were largely responsible for the U.S. defeat.

Congress has determined that the U.S. won't pay its back dues until the U.S. is voted back on the commission. This constitutes a dangerous precedent. Countries in the world are voted on and off various UN agencies and commissions with regularity, yet this is the first time a country has withheld funds because it lost a vote. Countries are obliged to pay their UN dues regardless of whether a particular vote goes their way. If every country withheld its dues because of the irritation of losing a vote on a particular agency or commission, virtually all funding for the world body would cease.

In the end, the result of this recent UN-U.S. flap may simply be to confirm that the U.S. is playing the role of the bully, determined to punish those who won't let Washington get its own way. What most Americans do not realize,

however, is that most human rights advocates—while disturbed by the election of some serious human rights abusers to the commission—are quietly pleased by the vote tally. It is widely seen as payback for years of U.S. abuse of the commission and a longstanding display of arrogance in international forums. For over fifty years, the United States has used the Human Rights Commission to advance its ideological agenda, attacking the human rights record of countries America did not like while defending and covering for regimes with as bad or even worse records, that happened to be seen as strategic or economic allies.

Under both Republican and Democratic administrations, the U.S. has sent more weapons to oppressive police and militaries around the globe than any other nation. The list of dictatorial client-states supported by the U.S. is a veritable rogues' gallery of the most serious human rights violators on the planet: Suharto of Indonesia, Mobutu of Zaire, the Shah of Iran, Park of South Korea, Marcos of the Philippines, Pinochet of Chile, and literally dozens of others.

To this day, the U.S. arms and trains Colombian armed forces closely linked to right-wing paramilitary organizations engaged in gross and systematic human rights abuses. The School of the Americas at Fort Benning—despite recently being renamed—continues to train some of the worst human rights abusers in the hemisphere. Meanwhile, in the Middle East, billions of dollars worth of arms flow to the misogynist family dictatorships of the Arab Gulf while Israeli occupation forces use American weapons to rain death upon protesting Palestinian children.



As recently as two months ago, the U.S. cast the sole dissenting vote against a UN Security Council resolution to send unarmed human rights monitors to the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories. Despite strong backing by reputable human rights groups from around the world, the resolution was defeated—even congressional Democrats rallied around the Bush administration in support of America's veto.

Unfortunately, that vote on human rights monitors was not the first time the U.S. has used its veto power to shield allies from criticism at the United Nations. Nor is the Human Rights Commission the only forum where the U.S. has stood out for its opposition to basic human rights: The U.S. is one of the few countries to oppose the international treaty to ban land mines, which, if enacted, would save thousands of children from death and maiming every year. It is the only country in the world besides Somalia—which hasn't even had a government for years—to refuse to sign an international convention against the use of child soldiers.

As if to underscore its contempt for the UN's human rights efforts, the Bush administration nominated John Negroponte as the next U.S. ambassador to the United Nations. As ambassador to Honduras during the 1980s, Negroponte covered up widespread human rights abuses by Honduran army units trained and organized by the CIA, and withheld from Congress evidence of large-scale human rights violations by the U.S.-backed government.

Negroponte's predecessor in the Clinton administration, Richard Holbrooke, was the key figure in the Carter State Department in ordering the release of South Korean troops under U.S. command to repress—and massacre—pro-democracy demonstrators in Kwanju in 1980. Holbrooke also played a major role in the U.S. support for Indonesia's brutal invasion of East Timor, which caused the deaths of upwards of 200,000 civilians; in congressional testimony, he denied reports by human rights groups that the mass killings were even taking place.

It is not just in the human rights arena that the United States has alienated the international community.

The U.S. has refused to ratify the comprehensive nuclear test ban treaty and has backed away from its commitments under the Kyoto emission control standards that are trying to mitigate the effects of global warming. The Bush administration has vowed to rescind participation in the SALT I Treaty, long considered the cornerstone of nuclear arms control. The U.S. is virtually alone in opposing making cheaper generic AIDS drugs available to the world's poor. As recently as last week, the U.S. refused to support the nearly universally supported tougher standards to crack down on international havens for tax avoidance by the super-wealthy.

In effect, the chickens have come home to roost. The withholding of UN dues will only make the U.S. less credible and effective in the international community.

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