

Uganda: Make key pledges when vying for United Nations Human Rights Council membership

Commit to human rights improvements at national and international level

(Kampala, May 11, 2010) A group of Ugandan human rights organizations called on the Ugandan authorities to commit to improvements to protect human rights as part of their campaign for a seat on the UN Human Rights Council. In a letter sent to the Ugandan government yesterday, the organizations, as part of a wider international coalition working around the Council elections, called for national legislation to comply with core human rights treaties.

Elections to the Human Rights Council will be held in the UN General Assembly on 13th May 2010. The elections are an important means of ensuring that states enhance their human rights record at the national level during their term as council members. UN General Assembly resolution 60/251 which established the Human Rights Council envisioned elections in which states would compete for membership based on their commitments to promoting human rights, and that elected members would “uphold the highest standards of human rights.” As part of a country’s elections campaign they are expected to issue pledges and commitments.

The African group is presenting a “clean slate” at the elections meaning that there are four candidates for the four empty seats. Uganda, recently announced its intention to run and will almost certainly be elected. However, it has not submitted written commitments to human rights compliance, as is customary for candidate countries.

“As a candidate to the Council, Uganda should show leadership by amending national laws, implementing the core human rights instruments, and issue a standing invitation to special procedures mandate holders, notably the Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression whose request to visit the country has been pending for four years” said Hassan Shire Sheikh, Executive Director of the East and Horn of Africa Human Rights Defenders Project (EHAHRDP).

The Ugandan authorities can still show their intention to comply with Council standards. In the letter sent to the Ugandan authorities today the group of NGOs,

and also signed onto by over 35 other organizations from throughout the world, therefore called on the authorities to make a series of specific pledges key to enhancing the country's human rights record at a national and international level.

The organizations highlighted Uganda's failure to fully implement the Convention Against Torture (CAT) which Uganda has ratified. Contrary to the requirements of article 4, Uganda has not criminalized torture at the national level. The organizations also highlighted a range of pending legislation which the government would need to significantly amend if the country is to draw closer to achieving the highest standards of human rights. Pinpointed were the Anti-Homosexuality Bill, the Press and Journalist (Amendment) Bill, the HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Bill amongst others as legislation at odds with the country's national and international human rights obligations.

"If the Ugandan authorities are truly committed to achieving Human Rights Council standards they should also make torture a domestic criminal offense and allow the Uganda Human Rights Commission and independent NGOs access to all detainees held in all places of detention both official and unofficial," said Livingstone Sewanyana, Executive Director of Foundation for Human Rights Initiative(FHRI).

The group also called on the authorities to enhance their engagement with the UN human rights framework notably by immediately submitting periodic reports which they have so far delayed to present notably on issues of torture and economic, cultural and social rights.

"The human rights council elections are only two days away and Uganda is one of the only 2 candidates out of 14 states running for elections that have so far not made any pledges or commitments. This is a poor reflection of the country's willingness to engage with the Council in a productive manner and to commit to enhancing human rights protection during its membership to the council," said Mohammed Ndifuna National Coordinator of Human Rights Network, Uganda(HURINET).

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