



When jackals play watchdog

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What do China, Cuba and Saudi Arabia have in common? Well, for one, they have dreadful human-rights records. For another, they're supposed human-rights watchdogs - as members of the United Nations' new Human Rights Council.

The council is the completely underwhelming replacement for the old U.N. Commission on Human Rights. (Talk about old wine in a new bottle . . .) Re-tooling it should be high on the agenda of new Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon.

Since its inception, the United Nations has been charged with protecting and advancing human rights. U.N. member states pledge to uphold the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights. But the U.N.'s record on this front has been nothing short of abysmal.

The Commission on Human Rights had evolved into an obscenity, its members including many of the world's worst human-rights abusers - who cynically used their seats on the panel to parry criticism and to block exposing other nightmarish human-rights records.

Over the years, members included such violators as Algeria, Pakistan, Sudan, Syria, Vietnam and Zimbabwe. Libya actually served as chairman in 2003, despite its ties to terrorism abroad (such as the Lockerbie bombing) and brutal repression at home. The next year, Sudan - a government engaged in ongoing genocide in Darfur - won a seat on the panel.

Even Secretary-General Kofi Annan couldn't deny this scandal, noting: "We have reached a point at which the commission's declining credibil-

ity has cast a shadow on the reputation of the United Nations system as a whole . . ." He pushed for the switch to the new, smaller Human Rights Council. New members were to be strong human-rights supporters, elected by a two-thirds vote of the full General Assembly.

But the United Nations failed again: The rules adopted for the new council have no criteria for membership other than geographical representation - so it's still open to the world's worst human-rights abusers. Not even states under U.N. sanction can be excluded. And election requires just a simple majority - 97 votes of 192 U.N. General Assembly members - but suspending a council member requires a two-thirds vote.

And while the council is charged with conducting human-rights reviews, even its official findings don't prevent human-rights violators from winning seats. If a Human Rights Council review finds serious human-rights abuses, neither the council nor the General Assembly is required to take administrative or punitive action.

These shortcomings, among others, led the United States to vote against creating the HRC this year. John Bolton, our U.N. ambassador, said

America lacked confidence that the new body would be any better than the old one - and that it wouldn't run for a seat.

He's been proven right. Among those voted onto the council were nine countries ranked "not free" in political/civil liberties by Freedom House: Algeria, Azerbaijan, Cameroon, China, Cuba, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia.

And, like its predecessor, the council wallows in Israel bashing - the attacks continued at last week's meetings in Geneva. One small plus came there: The council finally agreed to send a fact-finding team to Sudan (something African and Muslim states had long blocked).

The current council certainly doesn't deserve a dime from American taxpayers.

New Secretary-General Ban has a chance to turn the council around by kicking off the abusers and eliminating the disgraceful politicization. Until the U.N. Human Rights Council becomes an effective advocate for good - rather than another tool for tyrants - the United States shouldn't even consider giving it a whiff of credibility by running for a seat.

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