



Press release

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HUMAN RIGHTS COUNCIL BEGINS TO TAKE SHAPE

AS FIRST SESSION CONVENES IN GENEVA

The first meeting of the newly established Human Rights Council opens in Geneva on Monday, 19 June, marking a new beginning for United Nations efforts to promote and protect fundamental freedoms worldwide.

This inaugural session, set to last until 30 June, will bring together high-level representatives from over 100 countries and see delegates begin concrete work to allow the Council to build on the recognized strengths of its predecessor -- the Commission on Human Rights -- and flesh out the features that make it a stronger and more effective human rights body. The meeting will take place just over a month following the open and competitive election of the Council's 47 members by the UN General Assembly in New York.

General Assembly President Jan Eliasson, who oversaw the intense negotiations that resulted in the creation of the new Council last March, said: "The establishment of the Human Rights Council shows that Member States can overcome differences and deliver outcomes relevant to the people of the world. I expect the members of the Council to address the challenges before them with the same constructive spirit and commitment. We must show the world that the Council means a fresh start in the United Nations' work for human rights."

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who proposed the establishment of a new Human Rights Council in his report leading up to the World Summit, said: "I am confident that the Council will open a new chapter in the history of the UN's work to promote and protect human rights, and I urge everyone to join in the effort to make that happen."

At this session and over the coming year, the Council will tackle a heavy workload, including establishing the format of the universal periodic review, the groundbreaking mechanism that will allow it to scrutinize the human rights records of all countries. The Council will also set in motion the process of reviewing all mandates and responsibilities of the previous Commission on Human Rights and defining other aspects of the Council's work, such as the system of special procedures, encompassing over 40 independent experts and groups who investigate issues relating to civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights or monitor the situation in specific countries.

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UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, said: “The Council is a momentous achievement, but the hard work is just beginning. The road ahead is fraught with challenges, but it also holds many opportunities. As they take up the solemn responsibility of reshaping the international human rights framework, I urge all Members to put aside narrow considerations and act in the interest of all the people whose rights they hold in trust.”

An Improved Framework

The resolution establishing the Human Rights Council provides the framework for a significant improvement in the work of promoting and protecting human rights worldwide:

- A “universal periodic review” will ensure that all 191 Member States of the United Nations, starting with the members of the Council itself, will have their records examined in order to improve human rights conditions worldwide. All states must be held accountable for their shortcomings.
- The Council will hold more meetings throughout the year and for longer total duration than the Commission. It will also have a simplified and more efficient mechanism to convene special sessions to respond promptly to human rights crises.
- As the Council is elected directly by the General Assembly, the new body reflects the high level of importance given to human rights as something belonging to all people and, alongside development and security, one of the three pillars of the United Nations.
- Any Council member who commits gross and systematic violations of human rights can have their rights of membership suspended by a two-thirds majority of the General Assembly.
- The first election of members to the Council on 9 May was the first indication that the new Council was not “business as usual”. Countries competed for seats in an open and fair election and, for the first time ever, candidates put forward voluntary pledges and comments to promote and uphold human rights to which they will be held accountable.

The Human Rights Council session will be webcast live from 19-22 June at www.un.org/webcast

For further information on the Human Rights Council session, including agenda, list of Council Members and other background materials, please visit: www.ohchr.org/english/bodies/hrcouncil/

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