



General Assembly

HR/CT/703

Department of Public Information • News and Media Division • New York

Human Rights Committee
Ninety-fifth Session
2598th Meeting (AM)

HUMAN RIGHTS COMMITTEE OPENS THREE-WEEK HEADQUARTERS SESSION

The United Nations expert body monitoring compliance with the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights opened its ninety-fifth session in New York today, electing its Chairman and members of its Bureau, and adopting its provisional agenda.

The 18-member Human Rights Committee is meeting in New York through 3 April to examine reports submitted by States parties to the International Covenant. The panel of independent experts also monitors implementation of the Covenant's two Optional Protocols -- the first allows individuals to submit complaints to the Geneva-based Committee, the second seeks to abolish the death penalty.

The Committee, which is based in Geneva but which holds one session in New York each year, is scheduled to consider the initial report of Chad on 18 and 19 March; the fifth periodic report of Australia on 23 and 24 March; and the sixth periodic report of Sweden on 25 March. The experts will present their concluding observations at the end of the session. They had been scheduled to begin their work hearing Rwanda's third periodic compliance report this afternoon and tomorrow morning, but consideration of the report has been postponed. The provisional agenda is contained in document CCPR/C/95/1.

Incoming Chair Yuji Iwasawa of Japan, said the Committee was a respected treaty body regarded as one of the United Nations "most important and effective" human rights monitors. He pledged to uphold the Committee's high standards and to ensure that the panel worked efficiently and effectively.

The other elected members of the Bureau, included, as Vice-Chairpersons, Sir Nigel Rodley (United Kingdom); José Luis Perez Sanchez-Cerro (Peru); and Zonke Zanele Majodina (South Africa). Iulia Antoanella Motoc (Romania) was elected as Rapporteur.

Opening the session, Jessica Neuwirth, Director of the New York Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), said the Committee played a central role in the effective promotion and protection of human rights. Highlighting developments since the Committee's last session in October, she said Vanuatu and the Bahamas had ratified the Covenant, bringing the total number of States parties to 164. Further, Rwanda, Uzbekistan and Nicaragua had ratified the second optional protocol, bringing to 71 the total number of States parties to that instrument.

She also noted that on 10 December 2008 -- the sixtieth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights -- the General Assembly adopted the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which established a procedure for individual complaints, inquiries and inter-State communications about violations of rights enshrined in the Covenant.

In addition, she said the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, established in November 2008, had met for the first time in February. Its future work would focus on discrimination issues, which she hoped would give rise to fruitful collaboration with the Human Rights Committee.

She also noted recommendations identified during the Human Rights Committee's Eighth Inter-Committee Meeting, which focused on the harmonization of working methods, revised treaty-specific guidelines, follow-up to the Committee's concluding observations, and the Universal Periodic Review of the Human Rights Council. Regarding follow-up to the concluding observations, she noted that a best practices task force had been proposed. An overall analysis would be made, and the Committee's contribution would be essential in that regard. For its part, her Office would facilitate the implementation of treaty-body recommendations at the national level, and promote understanding of the treaty body system.

Turning specifically to the work of the Human Rights Council, she said the Council had held three special sessions: on the Democratic Republic of the Congo (November, 2008); Gaza (January, 2009); and the impact of global economic crises on human rights (February, 2009). It was currently preparing for the Durban Review Conference, to be held from 20 to 24 April, which would evaluate progress towards goals set by the 2001 World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance, held in Durban, South Africa.

In addition, she said the Council's fourth Universal Periodic Review session had taken place and two States parties whose periodic reports the Committee would consider -- Switzerland and the Russian Federation -- had gone through that process. Vanuatu and the Bahamas had ratified the Convention, bringing the total number of countries reviewed to 64.

She said that, along with examining the reports of Chad, Rwanda, Australia and Sweden, the Committee also would consider various communications, and continue its discussions on working methods, notably focusing on reporting guidelines, and finalizing its consideration of general comment 33. She also looked forward to initiating work on a revised general comment on article 19 of the Covenant.

The Human Rights Committee will meet in plenary at a time and date to be announced.

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