

The following is an excerpt from the official meeting records of the General Assembly on March 15, 2006.

The complete transcript is available at
http://www.hrw.org/un/elections/pdfs/ga_mtg_en.pdf (English)
http://www.hrw.org/un/elections/pdfs/ga_mtg_fr.pdf (French)
http://www.hrw.org/un/elections/pdfs/ga_mtg_ar.pdf (Arabic)

Ms. Banks (New Zealand): The establishment today of the Human Rights Council represents a renewed commitment by States Members of the United Nations to international human rights standards. The CANZ group of countries supported this resolution because we believe that its key elements provide for a more effective international human rights body than the Commission on Human Rights.

These key elements include: enhanced status as a subsidiary body of the General Assembly; a higher threshold for membership, notably through direct and individual election by an absolute majority of members of the General Assembly through secret ballot rather than unopposed group slates; and a commitment by Council members to uphold the highest standards in the protection and promotion of human rights and to submit themselves first to the periodic review that will be conducted of all Member States. It also provides a new suspension provision for members of the Council that commit gross and systematic violations of human rights.

Other elements are the ability to address, in either regular or special sessions, human rights emergencies when they occur, and the maintenance of the key strengths of the Commission on Human Rights, notably through the continued strong engagement of civil society and the use of innovative mechanisms such as special procedures and national human rights institutions to help translate the rhetorical commitments of members into genuine improvements in human rights on the ground. It also provides for the Council to adjust and improve its operation through a review after five years.

When we set out on these negotiations, we all had many hopes for the Council. It has not been possible to reach agreement on all of them. That the Council, once established, must avoid the shortcomings of the Commission on Human Rights; the fact that some Member States responsible for gross and systematic human rights abuses were elected unopposed on group slates; a repetitive work programme and a lack of flexibility to address issues as they arise — in the light of all of those things, we would have liked the resolution establishing the Council to have contained even stronger thresholds for membership through a two thirds majority vote and tougher provisions for preventing gross and systematic abusers of human rights from being elected to the Council.

To help strengthen the Council's capacity in that respect, each of the Governments of Canada, Australia and New Zealand individually pledges that, consistent with our Governments' longstanding national policies, we will not vote onto the Council countries that are under sanctions of the Security Council for human rights-related reasons. We also pledge our efforts to ensure a more robust and balanced agenda and programme of work for the new body.

To make a success of the Council will require a conscious commitment to bring improvements to the lives of people far removed from the Council's location in Geneva. Together we must cultivate a new culture, one which is inclusive, operationally focused and in which there is no place for double standards.

The Human Rights Council will be effective if it retains the respect of United Nations Member States and civil society, adopts an equitable and robust programme of work, involves the active participation of all United Nations Members, and if it has the authority to ensure that its

voice is heard, and listened, to by human rights violators. It will be effective if its voice gives hope to those whose rights have been violated.

Negotiations over the past month have been skilfully facilitated by our co-Chairmen — Ambassador Ricardo Arias and Ambassador Dumisani Kumalo — and drawn to a successful conclusion by you, Sir, as President of the General Assembly. We thank you and the co-Chairmen for your personal commitment and dedication to this historic task.

We look forward to working with the Council as it embarks on the critically important mission with which it has been entrusted.