

Committee on Foreign Affairs
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International United States Standing in International Organizations

Testimony by Gay McDougall
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We must all recognize the urgency of this moment. This is being called a time of reckoning. We face multiple pandemics—structural racism, towering inequality within and between countries, extreme poverty, health systems that are too fragile and inadequate to contain a viral spread, and racist hate speech fueling authoritarian governments in countries on almost every continent. The most challenging problems of our era cannot possibly be solved without active U.S. engagement in international institutions. Racism, antisemitism, anti-LGBT hate know no borders. Nor do more traditional plagues, including AIDS and Covid-19.

I am happy that the Biden Administration is re-engaging with the United Nations Human Rights Council and taking steps to repair our badly frayed reputation in those bodies. After all, the work of promoting and protecting human rights is a uniquely American contribution to the United Nations initiated by Eleanor Roosevelt. And while we have often failed to make it our overarching priority, the cause has rarely advanced without principled U.S. leadership.

For more than two years the UNITED STATES has been absent from the Human Rights Council and for an unprecedented period, there have been no American experts on the Human Rights Treaty Bodies. This reflected a disregard for the important work being conducted by those bodies to impact some of the most challenging problems of our generation. We cannot afford to not be in those rooms and at those tables.

When the UNITED STATES is present, important work can get done. One example was the U.S. initiative to expand the work of the Human Rights Council to create a United Nations expert position focusing on human rights abuses directed at individuals based on their sexual orientation and gender identity.

Another excellent example is the **Cross-Regional Joint Statement on Racism** led by the US and joined by 155 nations which was submitted last week as part of the General Debate on Agenda Item 9 during the 46th session of the Human Rights Council. Only US diplomacy could have achieved that broad a consensus document on fighting racism.

Today I would like to offer some perspectives on how the US might best regain credibility at this time that US leadership is of crucial importance. The US leverages its credibility most powerfully when it leads with honesty, humility, and commitment to principle.

As we re-enter the Human Rights Council and re-engage with the U.N.'s human rights systems, the U.S. must be honest and transparent about the failures of human rights enforcement at home. To deny the obvious would be self-defeating. For example, the video of the killing of George Floyd was viewed by millions around the world. As thousands of Americans poured out into the streets in protest, those protests were joined by thousands more in over 50 countries. Honesty requires that we submit to international scrutiny of our failures in the same way that we seek to hold other countries accountable for their own failures. Without that mutual transparency and accountability, the United Nations system to protect the rights of people around the world is made into a charade.

Our U.N. Ambassador displayed this so effectively last week in a speech to the United Nations General Assembly when she offered a moving personal reflection on her own life growing up in the segregated South and the deep structural racism that continues to undermine our own democracy. So many Americans share that story and that pain, myself included, and the rest of the world relates to it. Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield had the simple grace to admit that our nation has “[d]eep, serious flaws. But we talk about them. We work to address them. And we press on, in hopes that we can leave the country better than we found it.”

When we lead with humility and honesty like Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield did last week, we are far more effective in our diplomacy. And we set a tone and example for other countries to follow. The credibility of the U.N. human rights system depends on the willingness of each country to engage honestly and openly – and the U.S. is no exception.

As the Asian American Pacific Islander Community grieves in Atlanta and other US cities, and as FBI hate crimes data continues to spike, the US must be open to international scrutiny of its compliance with our human rights obligations, just as we demand that the U.N. hold other countries to account for their own human rights failures.

Further, the project of promotion and protection of human rights globally fails if it becomes merely another tool in the struggles of geo-politics. Human rights protection must be conducted in a safe space in which the principles of objectivity, fairness, impartiality, truthfulness, and good faith dominate. These are principles that should be upheld by all stakeholders. Challenges for world dominance are a constant theme of the global order. But if nothing else, the rise of the international human rights system over the past 70 years must represent a global consensus concerning the importance of placing human lives first.

Finally, when my last session of service at the U.N. concluded in 2019, the treaty body system was facing an existential crisis relating to resources. While others on this panel will speak in more detail about issues relating to the US budgetary support for the U.N., it goes without saying that if this is a system that we rely on as vital to the long-term protection of human rights here at home and abroad, then we must ensure that it has the resources to function adequately. The UNITED STATES is badly in arrears.

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We must pay our share. Our fair share of dues to the United Nations is a small percentage of the overall budget of the United States.

Let me conclude by saying that the United Nations today is under attack on many fronts. Too many governments – including the United States – withhold regular dues or fail to pay on time, leaving crucial U.N. offices crippled and unable to budget properly to achieve the goals that are important to all of us. Too many governments attack the U.N.'s independent human rights experts for exposing difficult truths and block the U.N.'s institutions from addressing effectively the most desperate human rights situations in the world today. But with the support of Congress, the Biden Administration has an opportunity to lead by example to safeguard these institutions and ensure the survival of the United Nations. We cannot afford to let the United Nations fail.