Statement by U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Barclay at the Human Rights Council

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Thank you very much, Mr. President.

We must always bear in mind that human rights are universal, and that every state has a duty to promote respect and accountability for these universal rights.  They are based on the value of human dignity, and on our shared responsibility toward the world’s most vulnerable people.  They are based on our dedication to protect and promote the rights of all individuals to freely practice a religion or belief, alone or in community with others; to express their views, whether they are doing so privately or publicly, in person, in writing, or on the Internet; and to assemble peacefully to advocate for causes such as those on which my country was founded – life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.  The United States’ commitment to fundamental human rights is stronger than ever.

Regrettably, too many of the actions of this Council do not support those universal principles.   Indeed, they contradict them.

So many people around the world – including in some member states of this Council – face ongoing efforts by their own governments to restrict their human rights and fundamental freedoms.  In some member states, individuals are subjected to arbitrary detention, extrajudicial killings, and sexual and gender-based violence by officials of their own governments.  That is unacceptable, especially given the leadership role that Council members have.

The United States also remains deeply troubled by the Council’s consistent unfair and unbalanced focus on one democratic country, Israel.  No other nation is the focus of an entire agenda item.  How is that a sensible priority?  Right now, the Assad regime is bombing hospitals in Syria and forcing its own people to flee as refugees to neighboring countries to escape its murderous rule.  Right now, in North Korea and Iran, millions of people are denied their freedoms of religion or belief, of peaceful assembly and association, and of expression.

The obsession with Israel through agenda Item 7 is the largest threat to the Council’s credibility.  It limits the good we can accomplish by making a mockery of this Council.  The United States will oppose any effort to delegitimize or isolate Israel – not just in the HRC, but wherever it occurs.  When it comes to human rights, no country should be free from scrutiny – but neither should any democratic country be regularly subjected to unfair, unbalanced, and unfounded bias.

When the Council functions properly, it has the ability to remind states of their commitments and obligations. It can hold countries accountable for the same.  When the Council works as it should, its successes are victories for human rights.

For example, HRC action catalyzed progress for reform and provided technical assistance to improve accountability for past violations in Sri Lanka.  The Commission of Inquiry on the DPRK spurred Security Council action on human rights abuses in North Korea – highlighting the link between human rights and international security and peace – and created an office which is cataloguing evidence that can be used to bring violators to account.  Council discussions about the arbitrary detention of prisoners of conscience and about travel restrictions on human rights defenders has helped to secure the release of innocent people, to give voice to victims, and to foster space for civil society to stand up against oppression.  The United States welcomes the opportunity to hear directly from the first-ever panel of victims of the atrocities in Syria at this session.

When the Council tackles complicated issues, such as how to appropriately combat religious intolerance and discrimination while protecting the freedom of expression, it improves people’s lives.

However, in order for this Council to have any credibility, let alone success, it must move away from its unbalanced and unproductive positions.  As we consider our future engagements, my government will be considering the Council’s actions with an eye toward reform to more fully achieve the Council’s mission to protect and promote human rights.  Building greater credibility of the HRC will increase our ability to help create a better world for individuals in *all* countries.  Together, by turning our attention consistently to the most critical human rights situations, we can make progress and help this body fulfill its mandate to make the world a better, safer place.

Thank you.