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Conference Ignored Human Rights Victims

The Durban Review Conference in Geneva, Switzerland, is over and I feel obligated to reflect on what I saw and heard, specifically as it relates to the participation of the United States. I was part of a 22-person delegation that attended the Durban Review Conference (DRC) with full United Nations accreditation from U.N. Watch, a non-government organization (NGO) that attempts to hold the United Nations up to its own high standards.

Prior to the conference, many people asked the question: "Should the United States attend?" and opinions fell on both sides of the argument. This is a fine question, but it skips over the larger point: "What does the United States hope to accomplish at Durban II?"

The conference was supposed to focus on global racism and anti-discrimination, but instead dwelled on the political conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Even more hypocritical was that the organizing body, the U.N. Human Rights Council (HRC), is lead by Libya and Iran, two of the worst human rights violators in the world.

Perhaps there is a better way to exact change within the UN? Perhaps there is a group that is more powerful than any one government or group of governments?

Did I see anything that did work in Geneva? Yes. I saw NGOs and the international media work together to show the true human rights violations that exist. First, a little history: In 1999, 450 Libyan children died from HIV/AIDS. The Libyan government, in order to pacify citizens and distract from their lack of properly sanitized hospitals, arrested six foreigners: five nurses from Bulgaria and a Palestinian doctor. These six people were not allowed to meet with a lawyer and were tortured until they confessed to crimes they didn't commit. In three separate "trials" they were sentenced to death. After a decade of imprisonment and torture the world media brought light onto their persecution and they were transferred to Bulgaria where they were all set free.

Harris Konter
Guest columnist

Back to the U.N. Human Rights Council. On Friday in the U.N. HRC general session before the start of the DRC, the Libyan chair recognized U.N. Watch (an NGO funded mostly by U.S. donors). U.N. Watch deferred its time to a Palestinian doctor; he began by saying: "Madam Chair, I don't know if you recognize me, but I'm the Palestinian doctor whom your country falsely imprisoned and tortured for almost 10 years." Before he could go on the chair banged her gavel and granted time to the one objecting country… Libya. The Palestinian doctor quoted U.N. Charter and managed to get a few sentences in before the chair again cut him off. This was a big story overseas (sadly, not here) and you can see the footage of this and a French newscast by visiting YouTube. This small NGO, staffed by five people, was able to draw attention to the real human rights issues and U.N. hypocrisy. Could the U.S. government have made such a bold move?

After spending a week at the DRC, I learned many things, but there is one idea which I would like to impart to those reading. It is not governments that exact change within the United Nations, it is the work of NGOs, their volunteers and the world media. When the United States points out the hypocrisy within the walls of the United Nations, the story is about what the United States hopes to gain. The story is never the actual hypocrisy. We need NGOs, who are beholden to no one, to fight for human rights because currently the United Nations is not equipped to do so.

The tragedy of this conference wasn't that Israel was demonized, but that by focusing on Israel, the true human rights victims in Darfur, Sri Lanka, Congo, Rwanda and elsewhere were ignored.

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