

November 17, 2010

Friends and Colleagues:

Earlier this month I traveled to Geneva to co-head an interagency delegation to an historic event: the United States' first-ever presentation of a Universal Periodic Review (UPR) report to the United Nations Human Rights Council. The UPR is a cumbersome moniker for something that is actually quite remarkable. Simply put, each member country of the United Nations is required to report on its human rights situation to the Human Rights Council and then be questioned, challenged, and applauded by other nations.

The State Department embarked on the UPR process more than a year ago when we, along with colleagues from 13 other federal agencies including Homeland Security, Department of Defense, Department of Justice, Health and Human Services, and the Department of the Interior, crisscrossed the country holding meetings with civil society to hear what they had



A packed house at the Palais des Nations

to say about our human rights record. It was critical that America's civil society – those activists on the frontlines of improving human rights conditions – have a say and role in our review.

The result was a [29-page report](#) which included a wide array of issues from racial profiling and immigration to torture and homelessness. The Administration sent a large delegation to Geneva to demonstrate further that we

take engagement with the international community seriously. I led the delegation along with Assistant Secretary of State for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor [Michael Posner](#) and the Department's Legal Advisor, [Harold Hongju Koh](#). For the three-hour session, we entered a room packed with delegations from around the world, NGOs and global media.

Seated in the front rows behind the United States' placard was a delegation that reflected the full support and engagement of our domestic agencies, including Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Indian Affairs [Larry Echo Hawk](#) who delivered remarks on indigenous issues and noted his own personal background as a member of the Pawnee Tribe.

In [opening remarks](#) to the standing room only Human Rights Council, I reminded the audience that the Obama administration is used to hearing criticism from its own citizens at home, in newspapers, blogs and talk radio shows. "Some are respectful and constructive, some are not. We protect them all."

Over the course of three-hour session, the range of issues covered was enormous and included commentary on the death penalty, America's commitment to fighting human trafficking, and racial profiling. We did our best to convey our openness, transparency and unrelenting efforts to become "a more perfect union."

We did not shrink from criticism either from governments, including those that have no credibility when it comes to their own poor human rights records, or our own civil society. The issues of torture and detention were very much front and center. Many delegations urged the prompt closure of the Guantanamo Bay detention facility and Legal Advisor Koh told the room "While the commitment has not wavered, the task is complex. President Obama cannot do it alone. Our intensive efforts to close that facility continue every day," he said.

As Mike Posner noted in his closing remarks, none of us three co-heads of the delegation would have been able to sit on that dais even 50 years earlier. And that is real progress. Just as important as the morning session where we made our formal presentation was an innovation we introduced to Geneva for the first time in the afternoon: a U.S. government-sponsored town hall meeting with American civil society.

Moderated by journalist [Sheila MacVicar](#), the town hall welcomed more than 100 activists from American civil society. We had more than 10 high level people from different Federal agencies on hand to answer questions. We also linked with Washington to host a spillover audience including representatives from the Departments of Housing and Urban Development and Education.



With co-heads of delegation Koh and Posner



Delivering the opening remarks at the UPR session

But we didn't stop there. We also [broadcast the town hall](#) live on the web where people across the globe tuned into to listen and ask questions. The 90-minute conversation was pointed, at times even testy as activists expressed concerns over indigenous rights, racial profiling and torture.

The town hall was another element of the Administration's

commitment to listen to, engage with, and incorporate ideas from civil society. Many activists in other countries do not have that right, and can even put their lives on the line by questioning and challenging their governments.

In our minds, this open dialogue with our civil society was a milestone. “Where, after all, do universal human rights begin?” Eleanor Roosevelt the American grand dame of human rights once asked. “In small places, close to home.”

We believe our day in Geneva would have made her proud.

As always, I invite and appreciate your [comments and feedback](#) on the UPR process, other multilateral priorities, etc.

Warmest regards,

Esther Brimmer