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UN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION FURTHER UNDERMINED

Re-election of Zimbabwe, Other Rights Abusing Regimes, Highlights Dire Need for Major Reform

NEW YORK, April 28, 2005 -- The re-election of Zimbabwe to the United Nations Commission on Human Rights plainly underscores the urgent need for sweeping reform of the UN's human rights system, Freedom House said today.

The government of Zimbabwe, despite ongoing, brutal repression of its citizens, was re-elected to a three-year term during voting Wednesday by the UN's Economic and Social Council, the governing body of the Commission on Human Rights (CHR).

"Once again, the already tattered credibility of the Commission on Human Rights has been severely compromised," said Freedom House Executive Director Jennifer Windsor. "The government of Zimbabwe under President Robert Mugabe ranks among the most egregious violators of human rights in the world. It has no place at the Commission's table, which should be reserved for governments that honor and respect their citizens," she said.

For the last several years, the Mugabe government and its supporters have driven white farmers from their land, stifled dissent, and intimidated political opponents, often through brutal violence. Zimbabweans do not enjoy basic rights such as freedom of speech and assembly and they cannot change their government democratically.

During parliamentary elections last month -- while the CHR was in session in Geneva -- the Zimbabwean government and its backers deliberately withheld food aid from supporters of the democratic opposition, arrested, jailed, and deported foreign journalists, and barred election observers from entering the country. The elections were widely judged by outside observers to be fraudulent and rigged by the government.

Zimbabwe was not censured during the CHR's session, which concluded April 22. Similarly, condemnatory resolutions were not pursued against China, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Russia, over its brutal tactics in Chechnya.

Zimbabwe was not the only rights violating regime re-elected to the CHR; China and Venezuela also preserved their seats.

More significantly, with the election of Cameroon and Azerbaijan, the total number of non-democratic governments on the CHR increased. Out of 53 member states, now 16 -- a full 30 percent -- are considered "Not Free" in Freedom House's annual "Freedom in the World" survey. There are 23 countries (43 percent) rated "Free" and 14 (26 percent) rated "Partly Free."

The increased presence of human rights abusers on the CHR reinforces the importance of fundamentally overhauling the Commission and replacing it with a human rights council composed of members with admirable human rights records, as recommended recently by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan. In an address before the Commission on April 7, he stated that rights violating regimes seek CHR membership in order to disrupt the Commission's proceedings and shield themselves from legitimate criticism.

The UN's Africa regional group nominated Zimbabwe as a candidate.

"Zimbabwe's re-election dramatically underscores the absence of democratic cohesion at the United Nations and the need for reform," said Ms. Windsor. "Democracies in each of the UN's regional groupings must support one another's candidacy for seats on important UN bodies. Foreign ministers currently gathered in Santiago, Chile for the Community of Democracies meeting should endorse the Secretary General's proposals, and their recently created UN Democracy Caucus should mobilize the UN's regional groups to ensure that democracies fill CHR slots," she said.

More background information on the UN and Zimbabwe is available online:

Composition of the Commission on Human Rights (61st session ending April 22, 2005)
www.freedomhouse.org/media/pressrel/033105.htm

The Campaign for a UN Democracy Caucus
www.democracycaucus.net

Worst of the Worst: The World's Most Repressive Societies 2005:
www.freedomhouse.org/research/mrr2005.pdf

Freedom in the World 2005: www.freedomhouse.org/research/survey2005.htm

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