

Commission on Human Rights— How it Works

The Commission on Human Rights is a functional commission of ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council). The Commission is composed of 53 member States and meets annually at the Palais des Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. It is the main organ of the UN dealing with human rights and plays a fundamental role in monitoring and standard-setting. Many international conventions and declarations in the field of human rights have been prepared by the Commission, its Sub-Commission and their various working groups, before being adopted by ECOSOC and the UN General Assembly.

The Commission has appointed a number of Special Rapporteurs, Working Groups, Special Representatives and independent experts to report on country situations, human rights issues and the implementation of human rights standards.

Contributions of NGOs

NGO access to the Commission on Human Rights is restricted to NGOs who are registered as being in consultative status with ECOSOC. (Consultative status is acquired through an application process under ECOSOC's Committee on NGOs.) These organizations can make written and oral statements related to an agenda item. Written statements can contain a maximum of 2000 words for NGOs with "general consultative status" and 1500 words for NGOs with "special consultative status". Oral statements were reduced at the 1996 session from a maximum of 10 to five minutes. NGOs can also lobby on proposed resolutions. Parallel meetings with NGO and government representa-

tives are often convened to consider action by the Commission on specific countries or themes.

Prior to the Commission, meetings with Special Rapporteurs on themes and countries can be organized by NGOs and written information can be submitted to the Rapporteurs and Working Groups. Urgent appeals for information on certain cases are often taken up with the concerned government, especially under the thematic procedures. Depending on their mandates, Special Rapporteurs will use all available information, including material provided by NGOs, to question governments and prepare their reports for the Commission. Information can be

sent to the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights throughout the year, but preferably before December to enable the Rapporteurs to take up the issues/cases with governments in their reports to the Commission. Some procedures (e.g. Working Groups on Arbitrary Detention and Disappearances) have special guidelines and questionnaires to be filled in. Information can be obtained from the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva, Palais des Nations, CH-1211 Geneva 10, Switzerland.

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Profile

Mary Robinson

Mary Robinson was appointed by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and confirmed by the General Assembly as the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. In that capacity she assumed principal responsibility for the human rights activities of the organization, including streamlining the human rights machinery throughout the UN system.

Ms. Robinson was President of Ireland in 1990-1997, has outstanding legal qualifications and has worked in the area of human rights, with special expertise in constitutional and European human rights law. She became a member of the English Bar (Middle Temple) in 1973 and served as a member of the International Commission of Jurists (1987-1990) and of the Advisory Commission of Inter-Rights (1984-1990). She served as Special Rapporteur to the Interregional Meeting organized by the Council of Europe, on "Human Rights at the Dawn of the 21st Century", in preparation for the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights.

Ms. Robinson served as a Senator in her country from 1969 to 1989 and was Chairman of the Parliamentary Social Affairs Subcommittee from 1977 to 1987 and Chairman of its Legal Affairs subcommittee from 1987 to 1989. She was Reid Professor of Constitutional and Criminal law at Trinity College, Dublin, from 1969 to 1975, and a Lecturer in European Community Law.

Special Procedures of the Commission

The UN Commission on Human Rights has established various mechanisms to investigate country situation and thematic issues in order to obtain detailed reports. The resolutions of the Commission request either an expert or a group of experts to be appointed by the Chairman of the Commission to work on a country or theme for a specific time period, which may be extended by future Commission resolutions.

These investigatory measures of the Commission are known as its Special Procedures. They have proved to be one of the more effective ways in the UN for supervising the implementation of human rights.

Thematic mandates—Special Rapporteurs

Extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions

Mr. Brace Waly Ndiaye, Senegal

Reports to Commission and General Assembly, and can issue urgent reports

Torture and other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment

Mr. Nigel Rodey, UK

Reports to Commission

Intolerance and discrimination based on religion or belief

Mr. Abdelfattah Amor, Tunisia

Reports to Commission

Use of mercenaries as a means of impeding the exercise of the rights of peoples to self-determination

Mr. Enrique Bernales Ballesteros, Peru

Reports to General Assembly and Commission

Sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography

Ms. Ophelia Calcetas-Santos, Philippines

Reports to General Assembly and Commission

Adverse effects of the illicit movement and dumping of toxic waste and dangerous products and wastes on the enjoyment of human rights

Ms. Fatma Zohra Ksentini, Algeria

Rights to freedom of opinion and expression

Mr. Abib Hussain, India

Reports to Commission

Contemporary forms of racism, racial discrimination and xenophobia and related intolerance

Mr. Maurice Glele-Ahanhanzo, Benin

Reports to Commission

Independence of judges and lawyers

Mr. Param Cumaraswamy, Malaysia

Reports to Commission

Elimination of violence against women

Ms. Radhika Coomaraswamy, Sri Lanka

Reports to Commission

Human rights and states of emergency

Mr. Leandro Despouy, Argentina

Reports to Sub-Commission and Commission

Internally displaced persons

Mr. Francis Deng, Sudan, Representative of Secretary-General

Reports to General Assembly and Commission



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