Appointment with farce

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In the present state of the world it is difficult not to write lampoons," remarked the Roman poet Juvenal. The author of The Satires came to mind last week when I heard of the [decision](http://www.unwatch.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=bdKKISNqEmG&b=1316871&ct=5137875) of the UN Human Rights Council to elect [Jean Ziegler](http://www.unwatch.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=bdKKISNqEmG&b=1286087&content_id=%7b68FA1D0B-9275-459F-A9B2-12E94F113A50%7d&notoc=1) to its advisory committee by 40 votes to 7.

All advisers to the council are supposed to possess "expertise in human rights", "high moral standing", and "independence and impartiality". So how does Jean Ziegler measure up?

In 1989 - four months after Libya bombed Pan Am flight 103, killing 270 people from 21 countries - Ziegler launched the annual [Muammar Qaddafi Human Rights Prize](http://www.unwatch.org/site/apps/nl/content3.asp?c=bdKKISNqEmG&b=1746395&ct=2667241) in Tripoli, boasting it was the "Anti-Nobel prize of the third world". Winners have included Fidel Castro, Louis Farrakhan, and a leader of a Ba'ath party women's organisation in Saddam's Iraq. In 2002, the recipients included the convicted French Holocaust denier Roger Garaudy, and Ziegler himself.

In 1986, Ziegler acted as an adviser to the Ethiopian dictator Mengistu, helping draft his one-party constitution. In 1993, Le Monde reported on "Jean Ziegler's trip to visit Saddam Hussein and Kim Il-sung."

Ziegler proclaimed "total support for the Cuban revolution" shortly after Fidel Castro had imprisoned many journalists. While visiting Cuba as a UN official he refused to meet Cuban dissidents but lavished praise on Castro.

In 2002, he praised the Zimbabwean dictator, saying, "Mugabe has history and morality with him."

In 2006, Ziegler [said](http://www.unwatch.org/site/apps/nlnet/content2.aspx?c=bdKKISNqEmG&b=1319279&ct=5151929), "I refuse to describe Hezbollah as a terrorist organisation. It is a national resistance movement. I can understand Hezbollah when they kidnap soldiers ..."

Ziegler [calls](http://www.swissinfo.org/eng/index.html?siteSect=105&sid=1593122)the US an "imperialist dictatorship" guilty of genocide, and labels George W Bush "the Pinochet who sits in the White House"; 9/11, he [alleges](http://www.countercurrents.org/gl-ziegler191205.htm), was used by Bush as a "justification for the staging of organised economic destruction of the people of the southern hemisphere".

He claims western capitalism has "put the planet under the scalpel of organised economic destruction", its leaders deliberately organising starvation as a "weapon of mass destruction". Western capitalism "kills, destroys, slaughters ... for no other reason than the desire for maximum profit for some cosmocrats who are driven by an obsession for power and unlimited greed".

(Actually, more people have been lifted out of absolute poverty in the past century than at any time in human history. In 1820, about 85% of the world's population were living in absolute poverty - usually defined as living on less than one dollar a day. By 1950 that figure had fallen to 50%. Today it is about 20%. As for [globalisation](http://www.foreignminister.gov.au/speeches/2006/060204_globalisation.html), the average global income per capita has almost doubled over the past 35 years with the poorest fifth of the population increasing their income faster than the wealthiest fifth. But, as Juvenal wrote, some things are just destined to become "the schoolboy's favourite and a subject for declamation".)

When Ziegler was [UN special rapporteur (pdf)](http://www.unwatch.org/atf/cf/%7B6DEB65DA-BE5B-4CAE-8056-8BF0BEDF4D17%7D/blind_to_burundi.pdf) on the right to food he criticised the United States 34 times but he never criticised any party in 15 of 17 countries deemed by the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation to have a man-made food emergency.

Ziegler didn't just attack the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. He called it "the worst in the history of colonialism". He described Gaza as "an immense concentration camp" and celebrated when what he called the "guards" left.

Ziegler's appointment as an adviser to the UN Human Rights Council was [bitterly opposed](http://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/WO0803/S00215.htm) by Per Ahlmark, former deputy prime minister of Sweden, as well as by the Canadian MP Irwin Cotler, a former minister of justice and attorney-general, who served as counsel to Nelson Mandela and Andrei Sakharov, and the Darfur survivor and president of the Darfur Peace and Development Center, Gibreil Hamid. A large group of NGOs lobbied hard. All to no avail.

What does this tell us about the UN? Well, back in 2003, when Libya was elected as chair of the Human Rights Commission - a Tom Lehrer "death of political satire" moment if ever there was one - the commission became a stain on the UN's reputation, a body as likely to side with dictatorships as with their victims. So it was abolished in 2006 and replaced by the UN Human Rights Council. Last week's appointment of Ziegler suggests little has really changed. That was the meaning of the farce played out in Geneva.

When those charged with guarding our human rights elect Mr Jean Ziegler as their expert adviser we would do well to remember the question Juvenal famously posed: "Who guards the guards?"