George Floyd's brother, Philonise, gives message to UN panel investigating 'systemic racism' in US

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The brother of George Floyd made an earnest plea on Wednesday, urging the top human rights body of the United Nations to launch intense international scrutiny of systemic racism, the killing of black people by police and violence against peaceful protesters in the United States.

Philonise Floyd, in a video message to the Human Rights Council, backed a call by dozens of African countries hoping to create a Commission of Inquiry — the council’s most powerful tool of scrutiny — to report on racism and violence against protesters by police in the U.S.

The unprecedented effort to train a potentially uncomfortable spotlight on the U.S., which calls itself the world’s “leading advocate” for human rights, comes as it has no voice in the room: The Trump administration pulled out of the 47-member body two years ago.

Floyd joined the U.N. human rights chief, the council’s independent rapporteur on racism, and many diplomats at an “urgent debate” championed by the Africa Group in the wake of his brother’s death. George Floyd, a black man, died after a white Minneapolis police officer pressed a knee into his neck for almost 10 minutes as he pleaded for air and eventually stopped moving.

“I am my brother’s keeper. You in the United Nations are your brothers and sisters’ keepers in America — and you have the power to help us get justice for my brother George Floyd,” Philonise Floyd said. “I am asking you to help him. I am asking you to help me. I am asking you to help us — black people in America.”

The council has regularly addressed police brutality and racial profiling in the United States, and they were major themes during its last turn five years ago for a regular review of its human rights record that all countries go through at the council.

But never before has the United States’ record in those areas of verminization and dehumanization led to an “urgent debate” on its record in those areas — and some rivals pounced.

Russia’s envoy accused the United States of ignoring racism for decades, and derided a “calamitous state of human rights” in the U.S. China’s representative said his country was “saddened and shocked” by Floyd’s death, saying it wasn’t an isolated case and one that exposed “chronic and deep-rooted racial discrimination” in the United States.

The U.S. ambassador in Geneva, Andrew Bremberg — in a statement ahead of the debate — acknowledged “shortcomings” in the United States, including racial discrimination and insisted the government was “transparent” about dealing with it.

President Trump has condemned the actions of police officers who were linked to George Floyd’s death, and on Tuesday signed an executive order on police reform.

“The United States recognizes and is committed to addressing its shortcomings, including racial discrimination, and injustices that stem from such discrimination, that persist in our society,” said Bremberg. “Every democracy faces challenges — the difference is how we deal with them.”

The executive order, Bremberg said in a statement, was “an example of how transparent and responsive our government leaders are in holding violators accountable for their actions and reforming our own system.”

The U.N.-backed council, which counts 47 member states, was also discussing a draft resolution floated by the Africa Group that singles out the United States. The text calls for a commission of inquiry to examine and report on “systemic racism” and abuses against “Africans and of people of African descent” in the U.S. and beyond.

Such work would be carried out “with a view to bringing perpetrators to justice,” the text states.

Calling the U.S. the world’s “leading advocate” for human rights, Bremberg said: “We are not above scrutiny; however, any HRC (Human Rights Council) resolution on this topic that calls out countries by name should be inclusive, noting the many countries where racism is a problem.

“We call upon all governments to demonstrate the same level of transparency and accountability that the U.S. and our democratic partners practice,” Bremberg said, making veiled references to Iran and China over their alleged shortcomings when it comes to human rights, too.

He alluded to recent accusations of “concentration camps directed at an ethnic minority” and a policy of “systemic racial discrimination against African nationals during the COVID-19 crisis” — a reference to detention centers for China’s Uighur minority and allegations of racial discrimination against black people in China during the coronavirus outbreak.

Bremberg pointed to how “another member state brutally murders more than 1,500 peaceful protesters,” in a reference to a crackdown against anti-government protesters in Iran in November. That figure is far in excess of the 304 people that Amnesty International estimated were killed.

Anne Bayefsky, director of the Touro Institute on Human Rights and the Holocaust and president of Human Rights Voices, also questioned the debate and resolution.

“The U.N. ‘Human Rights’ Council is now gearing up to create a Commission of Inquiry focusing on human rights violations in the United States. The same Council has never created a Commission of Inquiry on Mauritania – a world capital of slavery, on Saudi Arabia – home turf for gender-apartheid--on Iran – the world leader in terror and antisemitism--on China – an epicenter of ethnic prejudice--or on Russia – a systemic practitioner of LGBTQ oppression,” she told Fox News Wednesday afternoon.

The U.S. has not participated in any of the thrice-yearly council sessions since the Trump administration pulled out in June 2018, citing an alleged anti-Israel bias and acceptance of rights-abusing autocratic states as members. The United States has a right to respond as a “concerned country” in the debate, but was not expected to use it — at least not in person.

The debate was expected to continue on Thursday, when a vote on the African resolution could come up.

Bayefsky, a human rights scholar and activist, added: “Today’s Human Rights Council’s ‘urgent debate’ featured Syria's chemical weapons aficionados lecturing the United States on solutions for ‘brutality’ and ‘social inequality.’ The members of the U.N. Human Rights Council who will vote on tomorrow’s resolution include some of the world’s most appalling examples of racism, racial and religious discrimination, xenophobia and related intolerance, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Somalia, Sudan, and Libya.

"The saddest part of invoking the U.N.’s so-called ‘Human Rights Council' as a means to encourage reform in a democratic society like the United States, is that the U.N.’s lead human rights body is a global vehicle to cover-up and promote intolerance, not to eradicate it. Hypocrisy, double standards, deceit and duplicity is not a recipe for moral progress.”

Many countries, including other Western countries like the U.S., appealed for greater time to discuss the Africa Group resolution, but expressed overwhelming support for efforts to fight racism.

Defenders of the resolution say such abuses in the U.S. are too common despite a working judicial system, and now is the time to act — through intensified scrutiny.