**Iran Drops Bid for Human Rights Council Seat, Eyes Women’s Rights Body Instead**

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(CNSNews.com) – Iran has confirmed it will no longer run for a seat on the Geneva-based U.N. Human Rights Council. Instead, it aims to become a member of an international women’s rights body.

Iran’s bid to win one of four HRC seats earmarked for Asia had drawn strong opposition from rights campaigners already critical of the presence of countries with poor rights records – including China, Cuba and Saudi Arabia – on the 47-member body.

Iran’s withdrawal means that the remaining candidates for the four Asia seats – Qatar, Malaysia, Thailand and the Maldives – are all but assured of success when the full 192-member U.N. General Assembly on May 13 elects 14 HRC members.

Iran made the decision to end its candidature after discussions with other members of the U.N.’s Asia group, Tehran’s foreign ministry spokesman Ramin Mehmanparast said Sunday.

Hinting at a quid pro quo, he said that Iran would instead be a candidate for an international women’s rights body – “and all Asian countries will support our membership.”

It was not immediately clear which body he meant. Iran’s ILNA news agency quoted Mehmanparast as saying the “Women’s Human Rights Council” while IRNA quoted him as saying the “International Commission for Protection of Women’s Rights.”

There are two main U.N. bodies relating to women’s rights. The 23-member Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) holds elections in June for 11 vacancies, but the nomination list closed in March and Iran is not on it. The 45-member Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) will have two Asia seat vacancies early next year, when Pakistan’s and Cambodia’s terms end.

Whatever the case, the prospect that Iran – with the support of other Asian states – will take a seat on a body charged with promoting the rights of women is certain to stoke controversy.

“Putting fundamentalist Iran in charge of a women’s rights commission is like putting a pyromaniac as chief of the fire department,” Hillel Neuer, director of the Geneva-based U.N. Watch, said late Sunday. “It’s an outrage, and completely unacceptable.”

Among the reasons Iranian and other human rights advocates gave for urging governments to block Iran’s HRC candidacy was its treatment of women.

In a letter to U.N. member states last week one of Iran’s most prominent rights advocates, the exiled Nobel peace prize laureate Shirin Ebadi, urged them to reject the candidacy of a country “which has been violating human rights for years.”

Ebadi gave examples of discrimination faced by Iranian women, including the fact that “blood money” – the prescribed amount paid to the heirs of a murder victim – for a woman is half the sum of that for a man.

“The testimony of two women is equivalent to the testimony of one man,” she wrote. “A man is permitted to have four wives and divorce any of them without giving any reasons.”

Ebadi said that women in Iran who seek equal rights are charged with conspiring to overthrow the Islamic Republic. More than 100 such women currently faced criminal charges.

Another letter sent to U.N. members last week urging them to block Iran’s HRC bid came from 12 top Iranian human rights activists, who said women in the country were treated as “second class citizens.”

The State Department’s most recent international human rights report, released last month, noted that Iranian women face discrimination even in the administration of some of the most controversial shari’a punishments, such as stoning for adultery.

“The law provides that a victim of stoning is allowed to go free if he or she escapes,” the report said. “It is much harder for women to escape, as they are buried to their necks, whereas men are buried only to their waists.”

‘With or without Iran, council lacks credibility’

Iran’s withdrawal from next month’s HRC election followed behind-the-scenes lobbying by the U.S. and other Western members.

The decision drew widespread praise from human rights advocates and others, and U.S. officials characterized it as a sign the council was moving in the right direction.

Anne Bayefsky, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute and editor of Eye on the U.N., disagreed that the development showed the HRC was becoming a serious agency for promoting human rights.

“At the last council session, no resolution on Iran’s abysmal human rights record was even presented let alone adopted,” she said Sunday. “There has never been any special session of the council on Iran, though the events of last June’s election and subsequent crackdown cried out for serious attention.”

Bayefsky recalled that when Iran went through the council’s “universal periodic review” mechanism earlier this year the process “ended with a round of applause for Iran.”

“So the fact that Iran is not a member of the council has not made the slightest difference to the council’s total unwillingness to do anything about human rights in Iran.”

Noting the presence on the council of “countries with some of the worst human rights situations on the planet” – such as Saudi Arabia, China, Cuba and Russia – Bayefsky said that “adding or subtracting Iranian membership is hardly determinative of the council’s credibility.”

‘What about Libya?’

The last time Tehran stood for a seat on the HRC was 2006, when the council was established to replace the U.N. Commission on Human Rights (UNCHR). Iran was one of 18 countries competing for 13 Asian seats and got the second lowest number of votes, with only Iraq doing worse.

Since that first election, the amount of competition for seats has fallen sharply.

Barring any last minute entries, on May 13 neither Asia nor any of the other geographical groups – Africa, Eastern Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Western group – will offer any contest. All have “closed slates” – the same number of candidates as there are available seats.

Human rights organizations have argued that a lack of competition has helped violators to get seats.

Neuer of U.N. Watch drew attention Sunday to the likelihood of Libya winning a seat next month.

Although an official U.N. list of candidates does not currently include any African country, diplomats say Libya is one of four African candidates for four available African seats.

“Libya persecutes its two million black African migrants, for which it has been denounced by the U.N. itself,” Neuer said. He also cited the torture of a Palestinian doctor and Bulgarian nurses accused of deliberately infecting Libyan children with the HIV virus, and Libya’s incarceration of a Swiss businessman after Muammar Gaddafi’s son was arrested in 2008 and accused of assaulting personal staff at a Geneva hotel.

Neuer drew a contrast between Western opposition to Iran’s HRC bid and Libya’s.

“Western states are doing nothing about this because they now buy Libyan oil, and because Gaddafi has for now sworn off terrorism, and is in a kind of post-rogue recovery program,” he said.

“Western states who are on the council know that Libya will be elected, and fear the impact this could have on the perceived credibility of the council.

“Regrettably, they have more fear about the PR consequences – how the people will view what the foreign policy elites are doing in Geneva – than they do of the actual damage that Libya’s presence on the council will cause,” Neuer added.

Libya was not only a member of the now defunct UNCHR, but in 2003 it was nominated by the African group to chair that body.

The Bush administration opposed the move and for the first time in the commission’s history, the U.S. forced a vote, breaking with the tradition of filling the chairmanship “by acclamation.”

Libya won by 33 votes to three (it was a secret ballot, but the three votes were understood to have come from the U.S., Canada and Guatemala). Another 17 UNCHR members – including European Union nations – abstained.