

US to seek seat on UN Human Rights Council

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WASHINGTON— The United States will seek election to the U.N. Human Rights Council this year, the State Department said Tuesday, announcing the Obama administration's latest reversal of former President George W. Bush's foreign policies.

Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Susan Rice said in a statement that the administration will join the council to help make it more effective as part of President Barack Obama's desire to create a "new era of engagement" with the international community.

The Bush administration had boycotted the council over its repeated criticism of Israel and its refusal to cite flagrant rights abuses in Sudan and elsewhere abroad.

"Human rights are an essential element of American global foreign policy," Clinton said. "With others, we will engage in the work of improving the U.N. human rights system to advance the vision of the U.N. Declaration on Human Rights."

Rice, a strong advocate for seeking a seat on the council, said the decision was made "because we believe that working from within, we can make the council a more effective forum to promote and protect human rights."

"We hope to work in partnership with many countries to achieve a more effective council," she said.

The Geneva-based council was created in 2006 to replace the U.N. Commission on Human Rights, which was widely seen as ineffective and discredited. But the council has attracted the same criticism.

The United States, which played a leading role in creating the rights declaration under former First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt, has stayed on the sidelines, frequently disparaging the council for spending much of its time attacking Israel's treatment of Palestinians while downplaying human rights abuses in other parts of the world.

Last month, however, the Obama administration said it would attend council meetings as an observer after rights groups complained that it had sat out of the panel's discussions on the rights records of China, Russia and other countries that Washington previously criticized for abuses. It also said it would evaluate possible membership.

The council is made up of 47 U.N. member states that serve staggered three-year terms. The next election will be held May 15 at the U.N. General Assembly in New York.

The decision announced Tuesday means the U.S. will be seeking one of three vacant seats allotted to the so-called "Western Europe and Other States" bloc within the U.N. That bloc is currently held by Canada, Germany and Switzerland. Diplomats say Norway, New Zealand and Belgium are also interested but believe New Zealand will step aside to allow the U.S. to run.

Lawmakers reacted to the decision on a largely partisan basis.

Rep. Howard Berman, D-Calif., chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, supported it, saying the "time is ripe" for the U.S. to take an active role on the council and speak out about rights abuses.

The ranking Republican on Berman's committee, Florida Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, urged the administration to reconsider, maintaining that just last week the council had adopted anti-Israel resolutions in "yet another appalling display of anti-freedom, antidemocratic, anti-Israel bias."