

## **US to join UN rights body that Bush rejected**

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WASHINGTON— US President Barack Obama's administration announced it will run in May for a seat on the UN Human Rights Council -- a body the Bush administration had shunned.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and the US ambassador to the United Nations, Susan Rice, said the United States wanted a seat to help reform the body from within, according to the State Department.

Speaking to reporters later, Rice echoed criticism from those in Congress and the administration of former president George W. Bush who said the Geneva-based body routinely demonized Israel but ignored human rights abuses in other parts of the globe.

The international community had largely charged that the Bush administration acted on its own and even illegally.

But Rice said the only way to change the body was to join its ranks.

"The decision is in keeping with the Obama Administration's 'new era of engagement' with other nations to advance American security interests and meet the global challenges of the 21st century," Gordon Duguid, a department spokesman, said in a statement.

UN chief Ban Ki-moon hailed the new administration's decision.

"Full US engagement on human rights issues is an important step toward realizing the goal of an inclusive and vibrant intergovernmental process to protect human rights around the globe," Ban said in a statement.

Clinton, who is traveling in Europe, was quoted as saying "human rights are an essential element of American global foreign policy" while vowing that Washington will work with others to carry out UN principles on human rights.

"We believe every nation must live by and help shape global rules that ensure people enjoy the right to live freely and participate fully in their societies," she said in a statement released by the State Department.

In a conference call with UN correspondents, Rice pledged that if elected, the United States would work to reform the body when it faces a review in 2011 of its structures and procedures.

"We're very committed to bring about the serious reform that the council needs," she said.

"The principal problem is there has been too little focus on the most egregious abuses of human rights ... and too much focus, unbalanced focus we believe, on other issues that don't merit the amount of time," she added.

"Yes, of course we mean Israel."

The next round of elections to the Council will be held on May 15 in the UN General Assembly in New York when members will be elected to a three-year term.

The Bush administration opposed the council after it was set up in March 2006 and refused to be a member.

It said the body had lost credibility because of its repeated criticism of Israel and what it called a failure to confront major rights abusers.

But critics abroad said the United States, during Bush's term in office, had lost credibility on human rights over alleged torture of terrorism suspects in the US detention center at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba and in Iraq.

**Howard Berman, the Democratic chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, hailed the new administration's decision, saying the body had "become increasingly dysfunctional and politicized."**

**He said the United States could no longer afford to be on the sidelines.**

**"During the past several years the council's pathological focus on demonizing Israel has intensified to the point that genuine human rights crises in Zimbabwe, Sudan and other countries have essentially escaped scrutiny," he said in a statement.**

But the Anti-Defamation League, a leading anti-Semitism watchdog, expressed concern over the decision.

"ADL had urged Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to seek reform of the Council before deciding to join it," it said in a statement.