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Sanctioning Human Wrongs

What is the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights doing in Iran?

By Anne Bayefsky

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Louise Arbour, traveled to Iran this week to take a front row seat and listen attentively to Holocaust-denier Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The occasion was billed as a human-rights meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), currently chaired by Cuba.

While Arbour was hobnobbing with anti-Semites, butchers, and anti-democratic forces from around the world, Iranians were being prepared for public hangings. Arbour was reported by the Islamic Republic News Agency as having “expressed pleasure with being at the NAM meeting and described Iran’s representation office in the U.N. in Geneva as ‘very good.’” In an unusual move, the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights has so far neglected to put her official statement on their website.

The day after Arbour left Iran the government felt sufficiently buoyed by their U.N. stamp of approval, that they executed 21 prisoners. People are executed in Iran for charges like “enmity against God” or “being corrupt on earth.”

Iran need not worry about the U.N. reaction after-the-fact either. Arbour is quoted by Iranian news sources as telling participants: “The new method of considering issues related to human rights is comprehensive and not selective and the U.N. Human Rights Council is ready to present technical and consultation assistance to Iran.” “Non-selective” is the U.N. code for refusing to name states that violate human rights, let alone taking action to stop them. “Technical assistance” is the U.N. code for helping the state to avoid criticism, by pretending the problem is some kind of infrastructure glitch. It has been clear for some time that the new U.N. Human Rights Council is bent on eliminating all country-specific criticism, (not directed at Israel of course). Now, apparently, Arbour agrees.

Just what was Arbour listening so closely to inside those Tehran meeting halls anyway? Ahmadinejad delivered his signature statement about the illegitimacy of Israel’s existence, ranting about “the Zionist regime’s occupation” since the day it was created “60 years ago.” He then went on to blame the U.S. for a litany of evils. Referring to the U.S., Iranian news agencies report that his speech included the following:

They know quite well that the Islamic Revolution wants to prepare the ground for materialization of the promised `big event' (reappearance of the Imam of Age)...We are against rule of the non-righteous individuals....[R]evolutionary Iran aims at global government and a genuine Islamic culture

so as to gain a loftier position worldwide.

Arbour's all-too theoretical interest in the subject of human rights in Iran must have been piqued by Ahmadinejad's conceptual analysis of international human-rights protection. He challenged the very idea of universal human-rights standards applicable to all human beings, and substituted for them a quite different goal — that of cultural diversity.

The real import of “cultural diversity,” from an Iranian and NAM point of view, was elaborated in the conference speech by Iranian Foreign Minister Manuchehr Mottaki. He objected to human-rights criticism as “a tool for putting pressure on independent countries.” He called on participants to “modify” the Universal Declaration of Human Rights because the “Islamic world” wasn't present when it was drafted.

To drive home the purpose of the NAM “Human Rights and Cultural Diversity” get-together, participants adopted a final declaration that embraced the “keep-out” notion of protecting rights — “reaffirming...United Nations members...shall refrain from any attempt aimed at the partial or total disruption of the national unity and the territorial integrity of a state.”

All of this makes it astonishing that the U.N. High Commissioner for Human Rights thought she should station herself anywhere in Iran, let alone the front row of this assault on the *raison d'être* of her office.

The Iranians were delighted at Arbour's visit — crowing that the U.N. had “taken part in the conference at the highest level.” They clearly understood her presence as support for their view that human rights are all relative, or as Deputy Iranian Foreign Minister Mehdi Mostafavi put it, participants “indicated international resolve to uphold human rights in line with the cultural diversity in the international community.”

Recent examples of cultural diversity in Iran include stoning a man to death for alleged adultery this past July, and hanging the recent victims of mass executions from cranes placed in the public square.

Arbour's visit occurred at a time when suppression in Iran is brutal and the numbers of opponents of the regime hanged both in public and in prisons is increasing. It also took place in spite of Iran's refusal to cooperate with many of the U.N.'s own human-rights investigators, who have sought entry into the country for many years.

Arbour's visit was kept a little-known secret. According to the National Council of Resistance of Iran, as soon as she arrived in Tehran members of families of political prisoners and those on death row, tried to contact her, some rushing to Tehran for the mere chance to see the U.N. chief on human rights, and to deliver their personal appeals. But after spending an hour outside the U.N. building in the hopes of meeting her, they were attacked by the State Security Forces (SSF). The Resistance Council urged her to condemn the executions and many other forms of torture occurring in Iran, while other NGOs urged her to raise objections to additional rights violations. Arbour did meet with Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Shirin Ebadi and, according to Radio Free Europe, with some women's-rights campaigners.

There has been no public statement from her office; no indication that her participation in the NAM meeting was anything but on the level of generalities. The Resistance Council warned,

The political prisoners and their families fear that if their plight is not addressed by the U.N.

human rights chief on her visit to Tehran, the criminal mullahs will take it as a green light to continue with their barbarism and executions...[They will] take advantage of Arbour's trip...to increase torture and executions in Iran.

The mass executions that immediately followed her departure have made it clear: Their worst fears have been realized.

The disservice committed by High Commissioner Arbour's trip to Tehran is enormous. To the families of the dead, and the tortured, and the dead to come, Arbour has done incredible harm. To the real human-rights advocates struggling to refuse credibility to the frauds, she has inflicted injury. And to the principles, which have been torn up in the presence of the very individual charged with their care, she has been gravely offensive.

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