

April 8, 2008 Tuesday

SHOW: The Bryant Park Project 7:00-8:00 AM

U.N. to Review Member Country's Rights Abuses

ANCHORS: RACHEL MARTIN

LENGTH: 1806 words

RACHEL MARTIN, host:

So, Algeria, Argentina, Bahrain, Brazil. What do these four countries have in common? Well, they are four of 16 countries defending their human rights' records before the **United Nations Human Rights Council** in Geneva, Switzerland. It's the first session of a new UN program called "Universal Periodic Review."

What does that mean? Well, it's a process by which the UN is going to assess the human rights situation in each of every member state of the UN. That's all 192 countries. They'll be reviewed over - in a course of the next four years. It's a massively ambitious effort, but will it really change domestic violence rates in Pakistan, ethnic cleansing in Sudan, or restrictions on free press in China?

Here to explain what this human rights review is all about, and what difference it can make is Julie de Rivero, of Human Rights Watch. She joins us now on the line from Geneva, Switzerland, where she's been sitting in on the first review sessions. Hi, Julie.

Ms. JULIETTE DE RIVERO (Advocacy Director, Geneva, Human Rights Watch): Hi. Good morning.

MARTIN: Thanks for being with us. So first some basics. Explain to us what the Human Rights Council is, of the UN. Who's on it? And what's its mandate?

Ms. DE RIVERO: Yeah. Well, I think you summed it up quite well. I mean, it's a process through which the human rights situation of every country that's a member state of the UN will be reviewed over a four-year cycle, and under this process, every single country will be on the spotlight. Human rights defenders will have an opportunity to raise the issues that they're concerned about and to push for change on specific issues that are of concern in each of these countries.

So it's a review process that will not only examine the record of human rights violators, but also of countries that are trying to grapple with the human rights situation and improve their records, of small countries and big countries alike, of powerful nations and not-so-powerful nations. It's a new system and it's just started the day before yesterday.

MARTIN: So everyone's getting reviewed, but who gets to do the reviewing? What are the - who are the member states that sit on the council?

Ms. DE RIVERO: Yeah, that's right. The review process is going to be done by the UN member states as a whole, organized in a working group of the Human Rights Council. So governments will be able to ask of other governments which are being reviewed, what the situation is, what they're doing to improve it, how they're addressing specific issues that they are concerned about in that country.

And NGOs will also be able to provide input first to what they think is happening in that country. Human rights activists will be able to raise their concerns through written input. So it will be a debate that takes place in which governments will be asking many of the questions.

MARTIN: So all the 192 countries that are being reviewed also have a presence on the committee that's doing the reviewing?

Ms. DE RIVERO: Yes, that's right.

MARTIN: OK, and then when countries are at the table, when it's their turn in the hot spot, they are essentially self-reporting. How accurate can that be, if governments themselves, you know - it's in their interest to kind of make themselves look kind of good?

Ms. DE RIVERO: Yeah, you're right. I mean, governments will be giving a picture of what the situation is

in their country, but during the process, human rights activists are also called to submit information in writing about how they see the human rights situation in the country.

And the UN bodies and mechanisms and experts that have visited the country or have made recommendations about the country will also be asked to provide that information. So the review will take place on that basis, you know, with all those different sources of information inputting into the process.

Ultimately, we will have to rely on governments picking up some of those issues. So whatever issues human rights watchers are putting forward in this process, we're relying on governments to show interesting in this and pick it up and ask the right questions and make the right recommendations during the review process.

MARTIN: You've been sitting in on some of these, correct? What's the tone?

Ms. DE RIVERO: Yeah, I mean, governments - I think they were very apprehensive about this process, because it's a strange thing for them to have to account so openly about their human rights situation to other governments in a kind of peer setting. But I think it has been interesting to see that governments have been able to ask, you know, very specific questions about what is happening with the situation of women's rights in Bahrain.

What is the situation of Afro-American communities in Ecuador? You know, a wide range of issues. It's a first attempt at grappling with a review process that governments aren't used to, but I think they're taking the first steps in the right direction.

MARTIN: What are the standards being used for making these assessments? I mean, clearly, if you're looking at Sudan and Great Britain, those are very different countries with very different human rights histories. You use the same standards to measure?

Ms. DE RIVERO: Yeah, I mean, the standards that we have are the international human rights treaties that governments have signed up to and the human rights standards that are in place internationally. But I think that also each review will reflect the situation of a country. So in the case of the UK, as you mentioned, I mean, there are particular concerns about, for instance, counterterrorism policies and the effects that this can have on human rights.

Whereas in a country like Sudan, as you said, the issues are going to be completely different, and they're going to be about killings and disappearances, and general acts of - gross violations of human rights. So I mean the standards are the same for everybody, but the situation is different. So the debates and the outcomes may be different according to each situation.

MARTIN: And then what happens at the end of this review? I mean, it's a four-year - it's going to take four years. This is clearly a lot of work for the council, but...

Ms. DE RIVERO: Yeah, it will take four years to get through the whole list of countries, but each one will be having their results as they move forward. So the results will be kind of a summary of the debates that are taking place of the issues that were raised - which were the main issues raised and what were the actual recommendations that governments made to the state to address and improve their human rights record on that particular issue.

MARTIN: So when a country is finished with its review, it gets some kind of rating or recommendation - an action plan? What happens when it's done?

Ms. DE RIVERO: Yeah, there will be a report that's adopted in the plenary sessions of the Human Rights Council. So the countries that are being reviewed now will have their reports approved in June in the main session of the Human Rights Council.

And there, there will be a summary of the discussions that took place about the situation that took place in that country and the recommendations that were made to address the key human rights challenges that the country is facing.

And then the country will have the possibility of identifying the recommendations that it is - you know, that it promises to abide by, and the recommendations that it doesn't want to take on board, it will just ignore them. So that's a very big weakness of the process.

MARTIN: Yeah, they can just ignore the recommendations, but Julie, from your expert point of view, which are the nation states that are most likely to benefit from, or really change, as a result of this? I mean, clearly Sudan has so many issues, infrastructure. I mean, they can't even report the number of abuses

that are happening. It's a civil war. There are other countries that are in similar disarray. So what are the countries that can benefit?

Ms. DE RIVERO: Yeah, I think you're right. I mean, there's going to be a mixed picture here, and I think those governments which are most hardliners and recalcitrant and in which there is a very closed view of human rights, it will be very difficult to move them. But I think with other countries we'll have some surprises, you know. Governments making commitments to sign on to treaties that they hadn't.

You know, acknowledging that they have an issue - a problem of torture in their country and saying that they're willing to take steps to address it. So I think we're going to get some surprises, and then, with some of the very difficult situations, it's going to be a question of, you know, shining the light on them, showing what's happening, but in the end, we do rely on the cooperation of governments to move things forward.

MARTIN: When does China go on deck? Does it have its review before the Olympics?

Ms. DE RIVERO: Yeah, no, China will be coming - will be reviewed in, let me just check this for you. I want to give you the right answer. It will be in 2009. It will be in the beginning of 2009, so it will be after the Olympics - shortly after the Olympics.

MARTIN: And when does the United States of America go on deck?

Ms. DE RIVERO: Yeah, and the U.S. will be coming under review in 2010.

MARTIN: 2010. And what are some of the issues that human rights experts on the UN panel are going to be looking for in the U.S. review?

Ms. DE RIVERO: Well, we'll have to see how things change from now until 2010. Of course, there are issues of racism which have been raised by NGOs like ours in the past, and these continue to be issues of concern.

The issues related to the practice of torture and also counterterrorism policies and the way that counterterrorism policies impact on human rights. These are all issues that many human rights organizations have been working on in the United States and I'm sure that they will be coming up in this review process.

MARTIN: So even though there are some clear Achilles' heels in this process as far as enforcement, you think that this is a step in a positive direction for the UN Human Rights Council?

Ms. DE RIVERO: I do, and I think it does give human rights activists an opportunity to shine the spotlight on a given country, and you know, we seize every opportunity we get to do that kind of thing, and I think that this UPR process is providing us this opportunity, you know, an added window for advocacy and for shining the light on human rights abuses, and I think that's very important for the activist community.

MARTIN: Julie de Rivero is with Human Rights Watch. She joined us from Geneva, Switzerland, talking about the UN Human Rights Council's new initiative, the Universal Periodic Review. Hey, thanks, Julie. We appreciate it.

Ms. DE RIVERO: OK, thanks.

MARTIN: Take care.

Ms. DE RIVERO: Bye.