U.S. Faces Doubts About Leadership on Human Rights

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UNITED NATIONS, Sept. 21 -- From the beginning, the Obama administration has unabashedly embraced the United Nations, pursuing a diplomatic strategy that reflects a belief that the world's sole superpower can no longer afford to go it alone. But, as the U.N. General Assembly gets underway this week, human rights activists and political analysts say the new approach has undercut U.S. leadership on human rights issues.

Rights advocates have been frustrated by several episodes. They say U.S. diplomats have sent mixed messages about their intention to reward -- or punish -- the Sudanese government for its alleged role in genocide in Darfur. The United States rejected a U.N. proposal to compel Israel and Hamas to conduct credible investigations into war crimes in the Gaza Strip. And the administration has pursued a low-profile approach to Sri Lanka, where a military offensive against rebels is believed to have killed thousands of civilians.

The administration continues to assert that "the United States is not going to preach its values and not going to impose its values," said Kenneth Roth, executive director of Human Rights Watch. "The problem is they are not American values -- they are international values."

U.S. officials assert they have shown leadership on human rights, citing the administration's decision to weigh prosecutions of CIA interrogators. They note that the administration joined the U.N. Human Rights Council, reversing the Bush administration's policy of shunning the troubled rights agency in the hopes of reforming it. A U.S. vote on the Security Council in June was crucial in ensuring continued U.N. scrutiny of Sudan's rights record.

Being a Team Player

But U.S. officials say that American credibility also lies in their willingness to be team players. In the past several months, the United States has pledged to sign U.N. arms control and human rights treaties, and has committed to sending U.S. officers to far-flung U.N. peacekeeping missions. Susan E. Rice, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, says cooperation with the global organization is essential for coordinating international efforts to combat terrorism, scrap nuclear weapons arsenals and fight pandemics.

"No single country, even one as powerful as our own, can deal with these challenges in isolation," Rice said. "We are fundamentally living in an era when our security and our well-being are very much linked to the security and well-being of people elsewhere. That's a simple recognition of reality."

John R. Bolton, one of the U.S. ambassadors to the United Nations under President George W. Bush, said the Obama administration's strategy at the United Nations resembles a religious "act of faith." He questioned the wisdom of empowering the organization.

The United Nations' contribution to the "great questions of our time" -- counterterrorism and nonproliferation -- have been only "marginally effective," Bolton said.

He also has criticized U.S. support for the Human Rights Council, a body that "spends its time attacking Israel and the United States."

In April, the council, based in Geneva, called for an investigation into alleged abuses during the war in Gaza last winter. Richard Goldstone, a South African judge who headed the probe, insisted on expanding the investigation to examine abuses by Hamas and other Palestinian militants. His report accused both sides of committing war crimes and called on the Security Council to compel Israel and Hamas to conduct credible investigations.

Human rights advocates urged the United States to back Goldstone, saying it would show that the United States is willing to hold even its closest ally to account for abuses. But Rice rejected his recommendations, saying the "weight of the report is something like 85 percent oriented towards very specific and harsh condemnation and conclusions related to Israel. . . . In that regard it remains unbalanced, although obviously less so than it might have been."

Troubled About Darfur

Jerry Fowler, executive director of the Save Darfur Coalition, said the administration's approach to Darfur has been troubling. In recent months, Obama's special envoy, retired Air Force Maj. Gen. J. Scott Gration, has pursued a more conciliatory approach toward Sudan, saying that genocide was no longer taking place in Darfur and that it was time to ease some sanctions.
"We have been pushing consistently for a balance of incentives and pressures, and so far we haven't really seen that balance," Fowler said. "Publicly, there has been more of an emphasis on incentives."

Rice said Gration's "vitaly important" efforts to pursue a political settlement to crises in Sudan should not be interpreted to mean "that we are any less concerned" about Sudan's commission of atrocities "or that we are prepared to wield carrots in advance of concerted and very significant steps on the ground. That's not the policy of the United States."

**Silence on Sri Lanka?**

The other major concern of human rights advocates monitoring developments at the United Nations is Sri Lanka.

When the government launched its final offensive this year against the country's Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), it was Mexico and Austria that first raised the alarm in the Security Council. France and Britain sent their foreign ministers to the Sri Lankan capital, Colombo, to press the government to show restraint.

The United States supported those efforts to draw attention to the crisis in the Security Council, which China and Russia opposed. It backed a compromise that allowed for discussion on the Sri Lanka conflict in the U.N. basement.

"The U.S. government remained relatively silent on the Sri Lankan crisis, especially in the early stages of the fighting," said Fabienne Hara, vice president for multilateral affairs at the International Crisis Group. Its response to Sri Lanka "did not seem to match the commitment to preventing mass human rights abuses stated during the presidential campaign," she said.

Rice challenged that assessment, saying "my perception is that we spoke out very forcefully." She said that the United States had a strong ambassador on the ground in Sri Lanka, conveying American concerns, and that the assistant secretary of state for refugees traveled there to conduct an assessment mission. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton, Rice said, had been personally focused on the issue.

"I think that is an instance where our stand was clear, consistent and principled," she said.