



**April 28, 2011**

**To: Member States of the African Group**

**Re: Syria's Candidacy for the UN Human Rights Council**

Your Excellency,

As African nongovernmental organizations working in the field of human rights, we are writing to urge that your government withhold its vote from Syria in the election for seats on the Human Rights Council to be held on 20 May 2011, and inform Syria and Asia group members of this decision. We urge you to encourage your colleagues in the Asia Group to reconsider their slate for the May 20 election.

We welcomed the decision of all African states to support the UN General Assembly resolution that suspended the membership rights of Libya on the Human Rights Council. That resolution was adopted only nine months after Libya was put forward by the Africa group on its closed slate, but recognized that the substantial deterioration in Libya's human rights situation required action.

We are deeply concerned that a similar situation has arisen with regard to the Asia group's slate for the Human Rights Council this year. In January, the Asia Group endorsed a slate of four candidates including India, Indonesia, the Philippines and Syria for its four vacancies on the HRC. Since the Asia Group's decision was taken in January, security forces in Syria have responded to largely peaceful protests with lethal force, including live ammunition fired from Kalashnikovs, resulting in at least 300 deaths reported by Syrian human rights groups. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on extrajudicial executions stressed that Syria's "firing on peaceful crowds attending protests

or funerals is by no means justified” and “live ammunition is being used in clear violation of international law.”

Security forces in at least two towns have prevented medical personnel from tending to wounded protestors, and preventing injured people from accessing hospitals. The U.N. Special Rapporteur on the right to health demanded that those injured “be guaranteed immediate access to health facilities.”

The authorities have also detained at least 1100 protestors, with many then beaten and tortured; while a majority was released after a few days, a number of them remains in incommunicado detention. Syrian security forces sealed off several cities, and went house-to-house rounding up people for detention. El Hadji Malick Sow of the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention called for the immediate release of all peaceful demonstrators who have been arbitrarily detained.

Foreign journalists have been denied access to Syria to cover the protests, and Syrian bloggers and journalists operate at great risk, with many detained, and in some cases ill-treated. The U.N. Special Rapporteurs on freedom of expression and the rights of human rights defenders urged the Syrian government to “immediately release the human rights defenders, journalists and bloggers, who play a crucial role in monitoring recent events.”

Navi Pillay, the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, stated on April 25 that “the International community has repeatedly urged the Syrian Government to stop killing its own people, but our calls have gone unheeded.” On April 26, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon said: “I condemn, utterly, the continuing violence against peaceful demonstrators, most particularly the use of tanks and live fire that have killed and injured hundreds of people.”

Given its commission of gross and systematic violations which would fully justify suspension of a sitting Council member, Syria should not be chosen for election to the Council at this time. The rapid deterioration in the human rights situation in Syria should lead the Asia group to rescind its endorsement of the slate including Syria, and open the slate to other candidates.

The General Assembly must not have double standards, and proceed to elect Syria to the Human Rights Council while it is committing the very same violations for which the membership of Libya was so recently suspended. We

urge you to encourage your colleagues in the Asia Group to reconsider their slate for the May 20 election. We also ask that you decide to withhold your vote for Syria in the election, and inform Syria and Asia group members of that decision. These steps are essential for the General Assembly to have a consistent and credible approach to membership on the Human Rights Council, given the consensus decision to suspend Libya from the Council.

With highest regard,

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