

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL

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Commission on Human Rights, 60th Session (15 March - 23 April 2004)

Corporate responsibility breakthrough

Today (20 April), for the first time ever, governments meeting at the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva confirmed the importance and priority that the Commission accord to companies' responsibilities in relation to human rights and requested the Office of the High Commissioner for human rights to focus on elaborating those responsibilities.

Following intense discussions at the UN over the last few weeks, this formal request was made by the UK government on behalf of Australia, Belgium, Czech Republic, Ethiopia, Ghana, Hungary, Ireland, Japan, Mexico, Norway, South Africa and Sweden.

The decision, adopted by consensus, specifically asks the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) to compile a report setting out the scope and legal status of all existing initiatives and standards on business responsibilities with regard to human rights, including the UN Norms for Business.⁽¹⁾

"We are very pleased that the Commission has acknowledged the need to strengthen standards on business responsibilities in relation to human rights and will consider elements of the Norms," Amnesty International said.

"This is the first time the UN Commission has companies' responsibilities on its agenda and we believe the forthcoming report will be a positive step towards ensuring better protection for workers and communities and to helping companies ensure their activities, including security arrangements and the activities of their sub-contractors, do not lead to human rights abuses."

Amnesty International expects that the OHCHR will draw on the Norms and their related Commentary as a principal source in the identification and assessment of existing standards in this area.

In the Decision adopted today, governments at the Commission requested the OHCHR to consult all relevant stakeholders in compiling the report. Amnesty International intends to contribute to the preparation of the report and urges that the process of consultation be open, participatory and transparent.

Amnesty International notes that the Sub-Commission Norms are already being 'road-tested' by a group of leading companies and looks forward to the OHCHR benefiting from the experience of these companies in the compilation of the report.

(1) The Norms on the Responsibilities of Transnational Corporations and Other Business Enterprises with Regard to Human Rights adopted by the United Nations Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, August 13 2003.

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