

August 29, 2007

Columnists - opinion: Ask candidates to step up, support international court

By Kate Karacay, Special to the Register

The Des Moines Register

Foreign policy is a crucial issue facing candidates in the upcoming presidential elections. It's clear from recent events that the United States cannot face global problems such as terrorism alone and that restoring relationships with the world community will require multilateral cooperation and respect for international treaties.

The United States has always championed itself as a defender of human rights both at home and abroad. An important gesture that will demonstrate the United States' willingness to uphold human rights and the rule of law in the world community is ratification of the International Criminal Court.

The upcoming presidential elections are critical to ensure we elect a leader who is willing to support the International Criminal Court. So far, Democratic candidates Chris Dodd, Dennis Kucinich, Bill Richardson and John Edwards have come out in full support of participation. Barack Obama gave support for the court in his 2004 Senate campaign, but has not spoken publicly about it in his current campaign. Republican candidate John McCain has stated that it is in the interest of the United States to support the International Criminal Court with its prosecutions of Sudanese war criminals.

It is up to voters to ask candidates their position regarding the court.

The International Criminal Court is an independent, permanent tribunal located at The Hague, Netherlands, with jurisdiction to try individuals suspected of the most heinous crimes, such as genocide, war crimes and crimes against humanity. Created as a permanent court following the temporary war crimes tribunals for Rwanda and the former Yugoslavia, it intervenes only in cases involving the most severe crimes and only if nations involved are unable or unwilling to prosecute the crimes on their own. As a recent series in the Register explained, Iowa native Stephen Rapp is prosecuting former Liberian President Charles Taylor for war crimes in this court.

As of 2007, 105 nations have joined the International Criminal Court, including the United Kingdom, Germany and Japan. Although the court will continue without participation from the United States, our participation would ensure that our government has a say in how the court works. Also, the court is the best leverage the world has to end impunity by grave human-rights abusers.

Recently the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for two Sudanese men, a former militia leader and a state minister, for their involvement in the ongoing genocide in Darfur. Given that the U.S. government has stated that current events in Darfur amount to genocide, the court's intervention shows that the court is working exactly as it was intended.

So far, the Bush administration has shunned participation. President Clinton signed the Rome Statute, the international treaty that governs the court, in December 2000. However, the Bush administration later suspended Clinton's signature and has since actively campaigned against participation, claiming a possibility that politically motivated charges would be brought against U.S. military personnel and U.S. nationals. This is not a real threat. The court concerns itself with only the worst cases such as genocide and crimes against humanity; it is not a tool for politically motivated attacks.

Along with warrants for Sudanese leaders, it has opened four investigations in Africa. The court has issued arrest warrants for five Ugandan leaders of the Lord's Resistance Army and a Congolese warlord who will face trial this fall for enlistment of child soldiers. It's common that a war-ravaged country will be unwilling or unable to prosecute such crimes on its own after witnessing the world's worst war crimes in recent years.

Many key issues are at stake in the upcoming election. Ensuring the next administration is willing to move forward on protecting human rights around the world should be one of them. Our nation is a lone superpower, and lending support to the International Criminal Court is a great step in asserting our position on human rights.

Iowans can play an important role in this. When you meet candidates, ask them for their position on the International Criminal Court. Ask them to support it.

*Kate Karacay is co-director of the Iowa United Nations Association.*