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## For People with Disabilities, U.N. Is Right; Presidential Candidates Are Wrong

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By MARK MOSTERT  
TIMES-DISPATCH  
COLUMNIST

VIRGINIA BEACH Barack Obama, John McCain, and Hillary Clinton have been almost completely silent on

issues crucial to a very large core constituency that will have a significant impact on November's election results -- people with disabilities.

People with disabilities in the U.S. comprise approximately 20 percent of the population, some 50 million people. While the presidential candidates have quite carefully calibrated their messages to black voters, women, and those concerned about health care and environmental issues, as well as scores of other special-interest vectors, they appear to have ignored a group of voters who, by their disabilities, make up the largest minority group in the United States -- by far.

Disability advocacy groups and blogs have been burning up cyberspace in frustration and more than a little anger. Their irritation is justified.

Perhaps U.S. politicians appear clueless about the issues facing people with disabilities because we in the developed world often assume that the rights of people with disabilities are already protected. That's true -- but often only to a point. In many other places, those with disabilities are, at best, ignored. Much more often, they are cruelly abused and horribly exploited.

We're not going to be able to label the U.N. with the nearsightedness of Obama, McCain, and Clinton. The U.N. has long been aware of two critical points in looking beyond the developed world (and added politicians) to improve the lives of people with disabilities.

First, 80 percent of the 650 million people with disabilities worldwide live in developing countries, where their lot is usually pitiful and shameful. They are routinely denied even the most basic human rights of survival, shelter, nourishment, care, education, and a host of other things that many of us take for granted.

Second, the delegates along the East River have understood that disability cuts across almost every other human interest one could imagine: ethnicity, gender, political, national, and religious affiliation, human rights issues, health care, and education, to name a few. They committed to encouraging member states to shape their societies in basic precepts of human worth and dignity: that people with disabilities have a right to equal treatment before the law, that they should be afforded unfettered opportunity to become productive and fully participatory citizens, and that member states were to actively work against the oppression and discrimination of people with disabilities.

Earlier this month, the U.N. reached a milestone in these exemplary efforts. In a two-hour celebratory ceremony headlined by U.N. Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon, a large audience gathered in the great hall of the General Assembly to celebrate the adoption of a formal international agreement, the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

The convention is regarded as the first new human rights treaty of this century. Not only do signatory countries pledge to enact their own disability laws and measures to improve disability rights, they also promise to eliminate discriminatory legislation, customs, and other practices that negatively impact their citizens with disabilities.

Among the convention's 50 stipulations are articles specifying that member countries should have no laws discriminating against those with disabilities, that women with disabilities are the most vulnerable and therefore in need of the most protection, that governments are to engage in significant efforts to raise disability awareness, that programs are needed to allow those with disabilities to live independently within their communities and as equal citizens, and that people with disabilities are to remain free from violence, abuse, and from any degrading form of treatment because of who they are.

It goes without saying that the issues of education, health and rehabilitation, and the right to work and employment -- as well as all forms of social protection -- are specified in the convention. Clearly, the convention is only a paper tiger unless its articles are enacted on the ground in each country.

There is no question that the challenges are formidable. For instance, in many places, the relatively simple task of awareness-raising, perhaps a prerequisite to enacting many of the other convention articles, will prove daunting. To be sure, overcoming societal prejudices will not happen overnight. Things become even more complicated around articles requiring cross-the-board education or health and rehabilitation care.

Irrespective, we should congratulate the U.N. for a job well done. Never again, on the international stage, will we be able to say that people with disabilities don't matter. As well it should be, because they do matter. They matter as much as anyone who believes that they are disability-free. Mark Mostert is the director of the Institute for the Study of Disability and Bioethics at Regent University.

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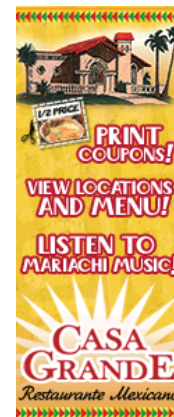
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