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Rights Groups Urge Scrutiny Of Gonzales

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The leaders of 30 civil rights organizations yesterday called on the chairman and ranking member of the Senate Judiciary Committee to closely examine the civil rights record of the Bush administration's nominee for attorney general, Alberto R. Gonzales.

In a letter to Sens. Orrin G. Hatch (R-Utah) and Patrick J. Leahy (D-Vt.), the organizations, all members of the Washington-based Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, expressed concern about the role Gonzales played as White House counsel in setting the administration's policy on the detention and interrogation of prisoners in Iraq and at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

"In these areas, we believe that there are aspects of Mr. Gonzales' record that raise concerns and that must be closely scrutinized by the Judiciary Committee," the letter said.

"The attorney general is the nation's chief law enforcement official, and this is one of the most important appointments that any president can make," Wade Henderson, executive director of the conference, said in an interview. "And for that reason we think that every candidate must be evaluated on his entire record, and whether he has a strong commitment to the protection of civil rights and civil liberties."

Among those who signed the letter are Ralph G. Neas, president of People for the American Way; Hilary Shelton, Washington bureau director of the NAACP; and Cesar A. Perales, president and general counsel of the Puerto Rican Legal Defense and Education Fund.

Notably absent was the largest Latino organization, the National Council of La Raza, which praised Gonzales and raised no objections to his nomination when it was announced.

The Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund, an influential California group that has called for close scrutiny of Gonzales, also did not sign the letter.