



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Ben Nighthorse Campbell

Co-Chairman - Helsinki Commission

Mr. Chairman, let me commend you on holding this hearing on developments in Azerbaijan, a very important country for strategic and economic reasons. The United States has serious interests in Azerbaijan and the entire Caucasus. These interests are not only economic or related to oil - but involve the security and human dimensions of the OSCE, including democratic development, as well.

Moreover, I believe what happens in Azerbaijan will have powerful repercussions outside the country. As the Helsinki Commission has heard in testimony in several previous hearings on Central Asia, the overall trend in that region has unfortunately been towards increasing repression, while elections have fallen far short of OSCE standards. Azerbaijan, which is also a Muslim country, has the opportunity to create a different model of development and pave the way for Central Asian states to move towards democracy. I have no doubt that Central Asian leaders and opposition movements alike are watching with keen interest what happens in Baku.

I regret that government-opposition relations in Azerbaijan have been so strained. It is unfortunate that opposition parties feel it necessary to organize demonstrations to influence the passage of a law governing elections that determine who represents the people. Such decisions should be made through the legislative process. But if the legislative process is viewed as unfair, people have the right to demonstrate, and governments have the obligation to respect the right to freedom of assembly. The April 29 rally resulted in scores getting arrested and injured. On May 20, thankfully, the opposition's demonstration proceeded peacefully and I hope that any future rallies will be equally orderly.

Far better, however, would be the adoption of a law that all sides view as fair. I know that the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights is involved in negotiations with all sides to reach a compromise. I support these efforts and hope they will be successful. At this point, nothing could be more important for Azerbaijan's future than the holding of parliamentary elections that are seen inside and outside the country as fair and democratic in keeping with established OSCE standards.

Turning briefly to the economic dimension, I note from previous Commission hearings on corruption that Azerbaijan was ranked 96th out of 99 countries in the most recent report issued by Transparency International of perceptions of corruption. A business survey by Control Risk rated Azerbaijan as the third most corrupt country in the world. These figures underscore the urgent need for real political and economic reforms. Azerbaijan's commitment to take the necessary steps to hold free and fair parliamentary elections this fall will be an important indicator of Baku's willingness to break the legacy of the past and pursue a course that will lead to a freer and more prosperous future for all citizens of Azerbaijan.

I look forward to hearing the testimony of our witnesses. Thank you. Mr. Chairman.