

Statement of the Honorable Christopher H. Smith, Ranking Member  
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe  
hearing on  
“The Role of OSCE Institutions in Advancing Human Rights and Democracy”

September 17, 2008

Mr. Chairman, thank you for convening this hearing to assess the role of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights and the Parliamentary Assembly in advancing human rights and democracy throughout the OSCE region. I have recently returned from Georgia where I witnessed first-hand the human tragedy unleashed by Russia’s invasion of that country. Assisting the tens of thousands of men, women and children displaced by the conflict is a daunting task only compounded by the fact that entire villages were cleansed and destroyed to prevent the return of their inhabitants. I am sure that this issue and others arising from the conflict will be raised when the delegates assemble for the annual Human Dimension Implementation Meeting in Warsaw and as parliamentarians from the participating States gather for their Mediterranean conference next week in Toronto.

As one who has worked in the human rights field for decades, I can attest that one of the unique strengths of the Helsinki Process is the body of commitments that all OSCE countries have agreed to on the basis of consensus. These provisions provide a common framework from which we can assess how countries are, or are not, living up to their promises. Given the political nature of OSCE commitments, it is essential that participating States, including the United States, raise violations when they occur. In a very real sense, we bear responsibility for speaking out on behalf of those others would silence. Far from a sterile diplomatic exercise, the work of the OSCE must be first and foremost about people – the truly human dimension.

In this regard, I think about friends and colleagues in Belarus subjected to all sorts of pressures at the hand of the Lukashenka regime. I think of the Jewish youth walking the streets in fear of being the next victim of anti-Semitic violence. I think of the Roma populations facing the bulldozers ready to raze the encampment where they have lived on the margins with few if any alternative housing. I think of the poor and indigent women and girls who fall prey to traffickers impressing them into a form of modern-day slavery.

Through my active involvement over the past decade in the parliamentary dimension of the Helsinki Process I have been able to work closely with colleagues from throughout the OSCE region in efforts to address these and other human rights concerns. As the OSCE PA President’s special representative on combating human trafficking, I have been privileged to work closely with parliamentarians sharing a commitment to enact laws aimed at punishing traffickers, stemming the demand, and ensuring protection for victims.

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

