



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

UNITED STATES COMMISSION ON
SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

Testimony :: Hon. Benjamin L. Cardin

Co-Chairman - Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

Mr. Chairman, I applaud you for convening this very important hearing. As everyone knows, the situation in Georgia remains tense. Opposition leaders are planning to begin a protest next week in Tbilisi, a city where demonstrations can have far-reaching political consequences.

The violence of last November came as a shock to Georgia-watchers all over the world.

In reflecting on recent events, I am struck by the thought that in the late 1990s and early years of this decade, Georgia was frequently in crisis. In the last few years, however, we had grown accustomed to a certain predictability. I hope Georgia is not reverting to old patterns.

It is essential in such times to maintain open lines of communication. That is only one reason I would like to take this opportunity to commend my friend and colleague Nino Burjanadze, Speaker of Georgia's Parliament. She is well known to many of us in the U.S. Delegation to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly. I am pleased to see that she, while Speaker and Acting President, sought to foster an atmosphere of calm in a very heated political environment and was able to hold productive discussions with opposition representatives.

I am confident that Georgians will, indeed, get through this difficult period and continue their democratic development. In that connection, I would like to stress the importance going forward of an independent judiciary. President Saakashvili has spoken of the need to address poverty and strengthen the role of parliament but it is critical to create courts that citizens will trust and see as the appropriate forum to redress grievances. With all due respect for freedom of peaceful assembly, if people have faith in the impartial administration of justice, they may not feel the need to demonstrate in the streets. I am sure the U.S. Government, including Congress, stands ready to assist Georgia in this regard.

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