

Opening Statement
Rep. Alcee L. Hastings, Chairman
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe
Hearing: "Challenges to Minority Communities in Kosovo"
June 3, 2008

Earlier this year, after an extensive period of talks failed to produce an agreement with Serbia, Kosovo declared its independence. Some forty-two countries, including the United States, have recognized this assertion of statehood, but many other important countries, including Russia, have not, and the plan set out by UN Special Envoy Martti Ahtisaari as the basis for moving forward has not received a formal endorsement from the United Nations.

It has been one year to the day since I first visited Kosovo. I did so in order to decide for myself whether or not to support the Ahtisaari plan. I met with the Prime Minister at the time and many other prominent Kosovo leaders, but I also traveled to Serb communities in the south and to Mitrovica (MEET-ro-veet-sah) in the north. I also visited one of the UN-operated camps for displaced Roma in the north, which had essentially been condemned as a health hazard, as well as a temporary camp for the Roma and their rebuilt neighborhood in south Mitrovica. I came away with the view that the Ahtisaari plan not only reflected the will of the majority in Kosovo, but also provided the best possible deal for the minorities. While the visit gave me reason for hope, it also gave me reason for concern.

Kosovo reaffirmed its decision to implement the Ahtisaari plan when it declared independence, and the constitution which will go into effect on June 15 as well as many other laws passed by the Kosovo Assembly reflect this commitment. The plan detailed numerous human rights protections for Kosovo's minority communities, as well as additional privileges that include guaranteed political representation, local self-government and new municipalities which may establish direct and transparent links with Serbia. Serbian cultural sites, especially Orthodox churches and monasteries, are to be protected.

We know from experience, these promises are important, and the passage of laws give us hope. Without actual implementation, however, there is no improvement in the lives of the people who are the intended beneficiaries. It remains to be seen how genuine the commitment of the Kosovar authorities to integrate and respect the rights of the Serb, Romani and other minority communities really is. It is the role of the Helsinki Commission, as well as other government agencies and non-governmental organizations, to encourage this implementation.

Of course, implementation is complicated by Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence, since the Ahtisaari plan was developed with the understanding that both Pristina and Belgrade would agree to it. We have heard reports that Belgrade has sought to ensure that Serb communities in Kosovo do not cooperate with Pristina, even if they would benefit directly from such cooperation.

We are fortunate to have as our witness this afternoon the OSCE's High Commissioner for National Minorities, Knut Vollebaek of Norway. The office of the High Commissioner has, for over 15 years now, been extremely effective in addressing difficult minority questions throughout Europe, and it has done so with great objectivity, nuance and innovation. Ambassador Vollebaek is the third High Commissioner, having assumed the position in 2007, but his experience on Kosovo and the Balkans goes much further back. Indeed, as Foreign Minister of Norway in 1999 he served as the

OSCE Chair-in-Office and had to contend with the many differences within OSCE regarding what action to take in light of the Kosovo conflict.

We appreciate your appearance before the Commission today, Ambassador Vollebaek. We understand that much of your work takes place in confidence or behind the scenes. We also understand that you represent an institution of the OSCE, and the participating States of the OSCE are almost evenly divided between those that recognize Kosovo's independence and those that do not. Given these circumstances, your presence here today indicates the strength of your commitment to ensure that the minority communities of Kosovo do not suffer additionally as a result of international differences on status. It is a commitment which the Helsinki Commission shares.