

Briefing
Hate in the Information Age
The Honorable Alcee Hastings
Chairman, U.S. Helsinki Commission
May 15, 2008

Good afternoon. Thank you for your interest in today's briefing on hate crimes and hate propaganda in the OSCE region. I want to start by thanking my Co-Chairman Senator Cardin for continuing to focus the Commission on this very important issue.

We have all been moved by media reports in recent years of nooses being displayed in this country, neo-Nazi attacks of Jewish citizens in Russia, and the mob attack of eight Indians during a street festival in Germany.

Some years ago I, my co-Chairman Senator Cardin and other Commissioners came together to push for the OSCE to begin to address tolerance issues following a spike in anti-Semitic incidents taking place in Europe. This resulted in a series of initiatives that began with a focus on anti-Semitism and went on to include racism and xenophobia, and intolerance and discrimination against Muslims, Christians and other religions. Now, five years later the OSCE has an established tolerance unit that publishes an annual hate crimes report and has developed numerous tolerance education initiatives.

Also, included in these efforts has been a focus on the Internet in promoting hate. Be it extremist groups attempting to gain fame, such as the publicized beheading video under a Nazi flag in Russia or the posting of the Dutch politician Gert Wilder's anti-Muslim Film, the Internet is increasingly being used to spread hate.

Today, we will hear presentations on how the Internet has been reconfigured into a virus by extremists and bigots, who use it to spread hate propaganda and reinforce each other's hateful convictions. To counteract this virus, we must be careful to note that the message, not the medium is the problem.

Differentiating the Internet itself from the actual sources of the hateful content displayed on its Web pages is a start. Strengthening and implementing our own federal hate crimes legislation and assisting countries abroad in also doing so is another step.

However, given our own laws not to prohibit the expression of an idea because it is hateful, we must also be careful to support other solutions. As Justice Holmes wrote, the Constitution protects not just freedom for the thought and expression we agree with, but freedom for the thought we deplore. Answering hate and bigotry with increased respect and tolerance is then yet another area we must strengthen.

While the diversity of the Internet's content and its accessibility are some of its greatest strengths, there are weaknesses as well. Today we will explore them with the goal of developing solutions to conquer hate throughout the OSCE region.

Thank you.