Statement by the Honorable Christopher H. Smith, Co-Chairman
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

"The Legacy of Chornobyl: Health and Safety Twenty Years Later"
April 25, 2006

Ladies and Gentlemen, tomorrow, April 26th, marks the 20th anniversary of the world's worst nuclear accident at the Chornobyl power plant in Ukraine. Compounding the disaster was that it took place under the veil of secrecy which was characteristic of the Soviet Union. In the days and weeks following the accident, people were denied accurate information on the dangers of what had happened.

This bitter legacy of Chornobyl continues to be felt twenty years later, and its consequences will remain for the people of the region and beyond for a long time to come. The health, social, environmental, economic and political consequences of the disaster continue to have a profound impact on countries in the region, especially Ukraine and Belarus, which bore the brunt of the radioactive fallout. Although experts differ – sometimes sharply – on the extent and magnitude of the human costs of Chornobyl, there is no doubt that the physical and psychological welfare of millions in Ukraine, Belarus and western Russia, including nuclear clean-up workers, have been harmed. There is no question that continued assistance will be needed for the most vulnerable, including the children. We must never lose sight of the human toll of Chornobyl.

Last year, I successfully included language in the State Department Authorization Act to provide assistance to improve maternal and prenatal care, especially for the purpose of helping prevent birth defects and pregnancy complications. The monies would be for individuals in Belarus and Ukraine involved in the cleanup of the region affected by the Chornobyl disaster. While numerous studies have furthered our knowledge of Chornobyl's consequences, there is still much we don't know, including its long-term impact on human health and on the environment. There is a need for further study and action. For example, we need to ensure that sufficient U.S. funding is targeted toward Chornobyl health studies and efforts to prevent birth defects through the distribution of folic acid and better prenatal care. We need to be vigilant of the latent health effects that still are expected to emerge.

The need for the international community's involvement – both governments and non-governmental organizations – is still great, and it is important to remember that Chornobyl is not just a Ukrainian, Belarusian, or Russian problem. We all have a stake in dealing with this truly global disaster. An immediate, pressing priority – especially for Ukraine – is the completion of the Chornobyl Shelter Plan as well as other efforts to mitigate the consequences of the disaster. With the rapid deterioration of the sarcophagus covering the damaged reactor, we can ill afford another release of tons of radioactive dust into the environment. We need to do everything possible to protect people and the environment from the large quantity of radioactive remains of the Chornobyl nuclear power plant even as we persist in our assistance to the victims.

Although the international community, including the United States, has provided invaluable assistance in helping to mitigate Chornobyl's devastating legacy, there is still much that remains to be done. We cannot afford to close our eyes, or our hearts, to these problems.

Among our witnesses today is the Director for the National Cord Blood Program of the New York Blood Center, Dr. Pablo Rubinstein. Members of this Commission are particularly interested in knowing what real cures and life-transforming treatments are being identified to address the immediately recognizable and latent diseases caused by high exposure to radiation. Having pioneered the field of public cord blood banking nearly 15 years ago, Dr. Rubinstein is on the cutting edge of offering hope, and life, and cures for an array of diseases once deemed terminal, including leukemia.

As the prime sponsor of the Stem Cell Therapeutic and Research Act of 2005, H.R. 2520, signed into law by the President last December, I am proud that federal funding is now helping increase the number of high-quality cord blood units available to match and treat patients. Our goal is to expand the inventory such that matched stem cells will be available to treat more than 90 percent of patients. All cord blood banks participating in the inventory program will have the capacity to search for cord blood and bone marrow matches through a single access point. Essentially a nationwide stem cell transplantation system is currently being established. Considering the implications for the use of cord blood to combat the diseases caused by radiation exposure and the lessons we have learned from the Chornobyl disaster, perhaps there is more we can do to be better prepared internationally should again we are faced with a similar accident or even a terrorist attack. As Dr. Rubinstein will testify, "Cord blood is especially, if not uniquely, suited to be used in the emergency treatment of subjects exposed to lethal doses of radiation."

Ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to have with us this panel of distinguished witnesses. We look forward to hearing your testimony.

Panel I
Stephen G. Rademaker
Acting Assistant Secretary of State
Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation

Stephen G. Rademaker currently heads the newly-created Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation of the Department of State. Immediately prior to joining the State Department, Mr. Rademaker was Chief Counsel to the Select Committee on Homeland Security of the U.S. House of Representatives. For most of the previous decade, Mr. Rademaker held positions on the staff of the Committee on International Relations of the House of Representatives. Prior to this, he held several positions in the U.S. Government, including General Counsel of the Peace Corps and Deputy Legal Advisor to the National Security Council. Mr. Rademaker earned a B.A., J.D. and an M.A. from the University of Virginia.

Panel II
H.E. Oleh Shamshur
Ukrainian Ambassador to the United States

Ambassador Oleh Shamshur has been Ukraine's Ambassador to the United States since January 13, 2006. A career diplomat at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine, he has served as Minister/Counselor of Ukraine's Embassy to the Benelux Countries, Head of the Ministry's European Union Department, and, most recently, as Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs. Ambassador Shamshur has also served as the Deputy Chairman of the State Committee for Nationalities and Migration of Ukraine and as the Counselor of Ukraine's Permanent Mission of Ukraine to the UN. Ambassador Shamshur holds a Ph.D. in History from the University of Kyiv.

I want to take this opportunity, Amb. Shamsur, to congratulate Ukraine on the recent parliamentary elections, which were the first of any in the non-Baltic former Soviet states to be deemed "free and fair" by the OSCE. The Rada elections were a milestone in Ukraine democratic development and underscore the democratic gains made since the Orange Revolution.

Panel III
David R. Marples, Ph.D.
Professor of History,
Director, Stasiuk Program on Contemporary Ukraine,
Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta

David R. Marples is a professor of history and director of the Stasiuk [sta-SOOK] Program on Contemporary Ukraine at the Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, University of Alberta. He is the author of ten books, including three on Chornobyl, with others on Stalinism in Ukraine, contemporary Belarus, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. At the University of Alberta, Professor Marples was awarded the J. Gordin Kaplan Award for Excellence in Research in 2003 and a Killam Annual Professorship in 2005-2006.

Pablo Rubinstein, M.D.,
Director, National Cord Blood Program
New York Blood Center

Dr. Rubinstein was born, educated and trained in Chile as a physician and surgeon. He specializes in the field of immunogenetics – the structure and function of the genes regulating immune responses, their relationship to transplantation and association with disease. He is head of the Laboratory of Immunogenetics of the Lindsley F. Kimball Research Institute of New York Blood Center and is Clinical Professor of Pathology at the College of Physicians and Surgeons, Columbia University. Dr. Rubinstein is the author of over 200 papers in the field of immunogenetics.

Kathleen Ryan
Executive Director, USA
Chernobyl Children's Project International

Kathy Ryan has over 15 years experience as a business executive, and as a consultant to non-profit organizations. She spent 11 years at America Online, Inc., where she served in increasingly senior management positions. After leaving America Online, Kathy decided to put her business skills to work for non-profits that she believes in. She has consulted with the Frank Foundation, a humanitarian organization dedicated to the neediest children of the former USSR; Vital Voices Global Partnership, which offers training and support to women in emerging democracies; and AOL/Time Warner Foundation.