

**By Felice D. Gaer, Chair
U.S. Commission On International Religious Freedom for the
Congressional Human Rights Caucus**

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Expert witnesses take questions from the audience. Left to right: Rabbi Abraham Cooper, HRC Co-Chair Rep. Tom Lantos (D-CA), Rabbi Andrew Baker, Abraham H. Foxman, and Commission Chair Felice D. Gaer.

On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, I commend the Congressional Human Rights Caucus for holding this briefing to examine the recent resurgence of antisemitic incidents in Europe.

The Commission was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to provide independent advice and recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State, and the Congress with respect to matters involving violations of the right to freedom of religion and belief. In an April press release, the Commission deplored attacks on synagogues, other Jewish sites, and individuals in France and Belgium and called upon the U.S. government to follow the issue carefully and urge the French government to treat those incidents with the seriousness

they deserve. In that spirit, therefore, I would like to concentrate my remarks today on the implications of antisemitism for U.S. foreign policy.

In San Jose, California, at the end of April, President Bush condemned antisemitism in Europe and elsewhere and made similar remarks in a press conference last month. In a March 2002 speech in Washington, Secretary Powell condemned antisemitic acts in European countries and applauded their governments' enforcement and security actions. But the U.S. government can go further in its efforts to take or stimulate action to help remove the scourge of antisemitism from European society - - and so can the Europeans.

To the extent that the ongoing violence is seen merely as a police matter, individual incidents may be prosecuted, but they are likely to continue unabated. Earlier this year, Jewish leaders and others in France and Belgium reported to Commission delegations that government officials were hesitant to treat the upsurge in antisemitic violence as anything but "hooliganism" by disaffected Arab youths. This view continued until April of this year, when - in the midst of a spike in violence - government officials finally acknowledged that these incidents were, in fact, antisemitic.

The Jewish leaders told the Commission that their communities were living in fear of the next attack. They also indicated that many antisemitic incidents go unreported out of fear of retaliation. When burnings, beatings, and other acts of violence are directed at a particular group, because of who they are and what they believe, it should be clear that they reflect degradations of human dignity and raise human rights matters; they are not merely police problems. The U.S. government should be unequivocal that antisemitism should be addressed as a matter of human rights. And in the European context, antisemitism also involves unique historical considerations that must be acknowledged and addressed. It was sobering to hear that in Europe in 2002 Jews were afraid to live publicly as Jews - something unparalleled since the Holocaust.

Fortunately, if somewhat late in coming, European leaders, with the encouragement of the United States, have started to speak out against antisemitic violence as a problem in and of itself. The Commission also notes, for example, recent statements by Russian President Putin and French Prime Minister Raffarin condemning antisemitism and distinguishing it from generalized acts of violence. Such general statements, however, must be backed by timely and thorough investigations and prosecutions of those who have committed violent crimes against one of Europe's most vulnerable minorities. Half-hearted promises to investigate and the failure to accord these cases importance as a national priority only heighten the anxiety of East and West European Jews. In June, the Commission met with the French Ministry of Justice, the police, Jewish leaders and others, who indicated that there had been progress in following up on this issue in that country.

Many, but not all, of the recent antisemitic incidents in Western Europe reportedly have been committed by disaffected, marginalized young members of North African Muslim immigrant communities. Like the United States, France and other Western European Countries are becoming more and more nations of immigrants. However, another source of the violence and antisemitic rhetoric in Europe is the so-called "skinhead" gangs that target Jews with bombings and other violence and seek to inflame public opinion against them. In some countries, they have targeted Arabs and other Muslim immigrants as well. Additionally, antisemitism by extremist nationalist groups in Eastern Europe and Russia is well documented. To compound the problem, antisemitic rhetoric emanating from some intellectual circles that goes uncontested by political and societal leaders has promoted an environment of intolerance toward Jews. The problem is widespread. As numerous studies attest, anti-Jewish sentiment, if it ever was politically incorrect in Europe, is surfacing again with apparent impunity.

Some Europeans have attempted to rationalize antisemitic violence as motivated by frustration over the conflict in the Middle East. This cannot go unchallenged. One of the first statements made by President Bush after the 9/11 atrocities was a warning to Americans not to retaliate against Muslims or Arabs regardless of the ethnicity of the terrorists. As French Foreign Minister Hubert Vedrine stated in a recent radio address, "Nothing that happens in the Middle East can justify racist and antisemitic acts or attacks on Jewish school buses or schools or burning synagogues."

Along those lines, it is a tragic irony and a despicable fraud that hatemongers in Europe - - now copied by their fellow-travelers elsewhere - - are attempting to paint Jews as Nazis, using words attributable only to their own greatest oppressors to demonize Jews individually and as a people. It is an offense, not just to Jews, but to every American and to freedom-loving people everywhere who themselves or their parents fought and sacrificed to free Europe from Nazi oppression and prevent its world domination.

Mr. Chairman, in a 1958 speech before the UN, Eleanor Roosevelt pondered "Where after all, do human rights begin? In small places, close to home - - - so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any map of the world. Yet, they 'are' the world of individual persons Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere."

Taking Mrs. Roosevelt's observations to heart, antisemitism must be attacked at the grass-roots level too. People must be educated; attitudes must change, intolerance and discrimination of all kinds must be rooted out, and antisemitism must be made so unacceptable

that people are appalled at any sign of it. Only then can the human rights of the Jews of Europe be fully protected.

In early April, French President Chirac said of the antisemitic violence, "These were scandalous acts that go against the foundations of French identity... They should be opposed with utmost vigour." He urged "parents, elected officials, school principals and religious leaders to remind everybody that our society needs the tolerance and freedom that are the foundations of our national community."

In an encouraging yet tragic manifestation of individual responsibility, we need only recall 28-year-old Tatyana Sapunova, the Russian woman who was maimed while removing a booby-trapped sign calling for "Death to the Jews." She didn't have to get involved, but she did, because she knew that such hate is wrong.

The problem of antisemitism in Europe can be addressed by the U.S. government not only on a bilateral, but also a multilateral basis, especially in the European institutions. In that regard, it is gratifying that last month in Berlin, at the initiative of Members of the U.S. Congress, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly adopted a resolution that condemned antisemitic violence throughout the region, recognized the danger that it poses to European security, and urged a follow-up event to explore effective measures to prevent antisemitism. This followed a side event on antisemitism convened by Congressman Chris Smith and a German counterpart. I also commend the Helsinki Commission for its leadership on this issue.

At last year's OSCE Human Dimension meeting, the U.S. delegation failed to specify human rights violations that had been committed in particular countries. This failure to "name names" was an unfortunate departure from long-standing practice. The Commission hopes that, in their public statements at this year's meeting, the U.S. delegation will identify countries that violate religious freedom and other human rights.

In addition to the OSCE, the U.S. should also work closely with the Council of Europe to eradicate antisemitism, recognizing it as a Europe-wide issue. The Council's racism body, the European Commission on Racism and Intolerance has a mandate to report on antisemitism, along with other forms of intolerance. To date, however, its published reports are limited by the quality and consistency of data made available by national governments. The Council of Europe also is working jointly on education projects with the multinational Task Force for International Cooperation on Holocaust Education, Remembrance, and Research. When the Commission

visited the Council in March, we found their officials to be receptive to our concerns regarding religious freedom. In addition, they indicated that they would particularly welcome engagement by Members of Congress in their activities.

The challenge for the United States is to exercise its leadership in the fight against antisemitism, using every means available, both traditional and public diplomacy, in unilateral, bilateral, and multilateral settings, working with European governments and institutions, to address swiftly and forcefully antisemitic violence and combat the pernicious societal attitudes from which it springs.

I would like to commend the House and Senate for adopting H.Res. 393, and S.Res. 253, respectively, which reject antisemitism and call upon European governments to prevent a continuation of the violence and punish its perpetrators. Further resolutions have been introduced, and we urge consideration of the Commission's recommendations. S.Res. 253 calls on the Commission to continue to document and report on antisemitism in Europe and worldwide, and this I promise you that we will do.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.