

February 15, 2008: Anti-Semitism in the OSCE Region Remains a Serious Concern, Commissioner Felice D. Gaer Testifies Before Helsinki Commission

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WASHINGTON-Anti-Semitism poses a significant danger to the security of countries participating in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the premier trans-Atlantic group dealing with issues of human rights and democracy, Commissioner Felice D. Gaer told a hearing of the U.S. Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (the Helsinki Commission). Intolerance towards one minority community can escalate easily into a more pervasive, general atmosphere of hatred, she said. "We're concerned about physical acts as well as about inaction that fuels an environment of intolerance," she said at the Feb. 7 hearing.

Gaer cited Russia, Belarus, Belgium, and Turkey-and non-OSCE participating states Iran, Uzbekistan and Egypt-as countries witnessing particularly acute surges in anti-Semitic discourse and, in some cases, violence. She urged the Members of Congress attending the hearing, which was chaired by CSCE Chair Rep. Alcee Hastings (D-FL), to resist attempts to trivialize anti-Semitic acts and instead recognize that such acts constitute human rights abuses that can, in some cases, meet the criteria for prosecution as hate crimes.

The OSCE already possesses a unique infrastructure to address anti-Semitism, via three representatives appointed to the organization's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR). "There's no other international agency in the world that deals explicitly and distinctively with anti-Semitism," Gaer noted. However, she emphasized, the representatives' position within ODIHR must be made permanent and full-time. In response to a question by Sen. George Voinovich (R-OH), Gaer also pointed out that staffing and U.S. budget constraints prevent the OSCE from utilizing its human rights resources to the fullest extent possible.

In light of such inefficiencies, the role of the U.S. government in promoting religious freedom and associated human rights in the OSCE region becomes critical, Gaer said. Answering a question from Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ), she noted that, "We're not using all the tools that we have" to promote tolerance. Even though the United States originally played a substantial role in the creation and maintenance of ODIHR's programs to combat anti-Semitism, as of last year high-level U.S. support began to flag. According to Gaer, ODIHR's "work against intolerance, including anti-Semitism, is no longer singled out for particular mention or support" by the State Department, which wrongly signals that such efforts no longer constitute a top priority for the United States.

Gaer highlighted the Commission's recommendation that the OSCE Chair-in-Office provide more prominence to the three personal representatives through measures including:

- asking them to report in person to the annual full ministerial council meeting;
- ensuring that their reports are published and disseminated throughout and beyond the OSCE system;
- taking them on some of the Chair-in-Office's own visits to neighboring states and participating states; and
- encouraging participating states to invite them to visit the states separately.

"These matters could enhance not only the profile of the personal representatives, but the impact of their findings and recommendations on the scourge of anti-Semitism and combating it directly," Gaer said. Sens. Voinovich and Ben Cardin promised to raise the Commission's recommendation with the OSCE Chair-in-Office this week.

Given the rise in anti-Semitism and other forms of intolerance in the OSCE region, Gaer urged the U.S. government to authorize and appropriate additional funds to ODIHR to expand its programs that would curb expressions of intolerance. Using diplomacy to express the U.S. government's ongoing commitment to the protection of freedom of religion, belief, thought or conscience is equally critical, Gaer said.

The full text of Gaer's oral and written testimonies can be found at www.uscirf.gov .