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Africa, Global Health, and Human Rights Subcommittee
Considerations of H.R. 515, the Belarus Democracy Act of 2011

Opening Statement by Chairman Christopher Smith
House Subcommittee on Africa, Global Health and Human Rights
Excerpts of Remarks at Congressional Hearing
April 13, 2011

Before proceeding, I would like to express my deep sorrow over the tragic loss of life in Monday's metro terrorist attack in Minsk. Our thoughts and prayers are with the Belarusian people at this difficult time, and especially with the families and friends of those who perished, as well as those injured.

The fraudulent December 19, 2010 election in Belarus and the ongoing crackdown on democracy activists and independent journalists by the Lukashenka dictatorship underscore the need for this legislation. Immediately after the election, the government responded to peaceful protests against electoral fraud with savage mass beatings and large-scale detentions – over 700 people. Some of those jailed have been abused and even tortured. A number have already received harsh sentences of up to 4 years. Nearly 30 remain in detention. Their families, lawyers, journalists and democratic activists continue to be harassed and intimidated.

The crackdown follows the pattern of repression that has characterized Lukashenka's nearly 17 year rule. Through a series of rigged elections, large-scale intimidation, and the suppression of independent media and civil society, the dictator has long since consolidated his control over virtually all national institutions. Lukashenka's dictatorship has the worst democracy and human rights record of any government in Europe.

Several years ago, legislation I authored, the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004 and the Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act of 2006, passed the House and Senate with overwhelming bipartisan support and was signed into law.

H.R. 515 takes as its starting point the approach of the earlier legislation. It states a U.S. government policy of strong support for the Belarusian people in their struggle against the Lukashenka dictatorship, aspiring to live in a free and independent country where their human rights are respected, they can choose their government, and officials apply just laws that they themselves are subject to.

This bill encourages those struggling for decency and basic rights against the overwhelming pressures from the anti-democratic regime. It calls for the immediate and unconditional release of all political prisoners in Belarus, including those detained in the post-election crackdown and refuses to recognize the results of the flawed elections. It calls for a full accounting of the 1999-2000 disappearances of opposition leaders and a journalist in Belarus and the prosecution of those responsible. At the same time it explicitly opens the door to the re-evaluation of U.S. policy towards the Belarusian government should it take significant steps toward democracy and respect for human rights.

H.R. 515 supports radio, television and Internet broadcasting to Belarus, specifically Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Voice of America, European Radio for Belarus and the satellite television station Belsat.

Perhaps most significantly, the bill supports targeted sanctions. It expresses the sense of the Congress to deny the privilege of visiting our country of senior Belarus officials, their immediate families, and others involved in human rights violations and anti-democracy actions, including those involved in the December 19 post-election crackdown. Likewise, it has sense of Congress provisions prohibiting U.S. government financing, except for humanitarian goods and agricultural or medical products, and non-humanitarian loans from international financial institutions to the Belarusian government; and blocking assets owned by the Belarusian government senior leadership or their families and others involved in anti-democratic actions. These sanctions are aimed at the senior leadership of a dictatorship that displays contempt for the dignity and rights of Belarusian people – with these sanctions we stand with the Belarusian people against their oppressors.

Finally, H.R. 515 requires the State Department to report to Congress on the sale, delivery or provision of weapons or weapons-related technologies or training, Lukashenka's personal wealth and assets, and cooperation by the Belarusian government with any foreign government or organizations related to censorship or surveillance of the Internet.

* * *

Now a few words on the amendment. It changes the name of the bill to "Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011," inserts six new findings that update and give greater detail on the Belarusian government's human rights abuses in the ongoing crackdown following the fraudulent election of December 19, 2010, and the U.S. government's response.

It adds a statement of U.S. policy to call on the International Ice Hockey Federation not to hold the 2014 International Ice Hockey Championship in Minsk unless political prisoners are released – Lukashenka clearly plans to use the hockey championship to 'legitimate' his

dictatorship, it is being staged as a replay, on a smaller scale, of what the Chinese government did with the 2008 Olympics.

The amendment also strikes the authorization section. The State Department currently funds democracy promotion and civil society programs in Belarus through regional accounts, and it has already announced its intention to significantly increase its funding in response to the post-election crackdown – and I fully support such an increase.

Finally the amendment clarifies that the required reporting on the Belarusian government's arms trade will be performed within current levels of appropriated funding.