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**Urging Passage of H.R. 515,
The Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011**

*Excerpts of Remarks on House Floor
by Chairman of Africa, Global Health and Human Rights Subcommittee
Congressman Chris Smith
July 6, 2011*

Madam Speaker, I rise to urge passage of H.R. 515, the Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011. This bill, which I authored, demonstrates our strong and sustained promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in Belarus through targeted sanctions against the dictatorship of Alexander Lukashenka. I thank you, Mr. Speaker, for your commitment to bring this legislation before Congress.

Madam Speaker, H.R. 515 reinforces earlier legislation I authored, the Belarus Democracy Act of 2004 and Belarus Democracy Reauthorization Act of 2006, both of which passed the House and Senate with overwhelming bipartisan support and were signed into law.

This legislation is timely and necessary. 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 democracy-promoting 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. Of those charged, 40 have been convicted, with some receiving harsh sentences – up to six years. They include five of the nine presidential candidates who ran against Lukashenka. Their families, lawyers, journalists and democratic activists continue to be harassed and intimidated. It is the worst political crackdown in Europe in over a decade. And it is ongoing: Mr. Speaker, the repressive regime in Belarus was in full force earlier this week as police broke up protestors attempting to mark their country's independence day. Hundreds were detained, including independent journalists reporting on rallies held across the country.

The post-election crackdown has followed 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.

Madam Speaker, H.R. 515 takes as its starting point the approach of the earlier legislation, my 2004 and 2006 Belarus Democracy Acts.

Perhaps most significantly, the bill supports targeted sanctions. It expresses the sense of the Congress to deny the privilege of visiting our country to 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. H.R. 515 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.

Madam Speaker, the Belarusian people deserve far better than the Lukashenka dictatorship – this act of assistance to them in their struggle for human rights and democracy is an act of respect and friendship for the people of Belarus. I ask my colleagues to support this legislation.