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**House Foreign Affairs Committee Considerations of H.R. 515,
the Belarus Democracy and Human Rights Act of 2011**

Opening Statement by Chairman Christopher Smith
House Committee of Foreign Affairs
Excerpts of Remarks at Congressional Hearing
April 14, 2011

Thank you, Madam Chairman. 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 four 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.

Legislation I authored earlier, 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 the earlier legislation as its starting point. It requires the State Department to report to Congress on transactions or cooperation by the Belarusian government with any other government to censor or surveil the Internet, as well as arms sales and the personal assets of the dictator and his senior leaders.

Just as 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.

I want to stress that both the Bush and Obama administrations have made good use of the previous Belarus Democracy Acts (2004 and 2006) to emphasize to the Belarusian government that the elected representatives of the American people – by overwhelming and bipartisan majorities – support the policy of condemning and sanctioning the Belarusian government's brutal human rights violations.

In view of the unprecedented crackdown after the fraudulent December elections, we need to again send this signal to Lukashenka, and propel this policy forward amidst the administration's competing priorities.