

Thursday, June 10, 2010

Verbatim, as delivered

Chairman Berman's opening remarks at hearing, "Human Rights and Democracy Assistance: Increasing the Effectiveness of U.S. Foreign Aid"

This is the latest in a series of hearings on foreign assistance reform, one of the Committee's high priorities.

In past hearings and in other fora, we have examined the proper role of the military in carrying out humanitarian and security assistance; the efficacy and structure of our development programs; and, of course, resource levels appropriate to meet our national security, diplomatic and moral commitments around the globe.

Today, we will focus on our government's efforts to promote human rights and democracy abroad – a foreign policy imperative that enjoys strong broad bipartisan approach – and what we can do to make those programs more effective and efficient.

A core American principle is that all people should enjoy freedom of speech, expression, and religion, and freedom from tyranny, oppression, torture and discrimination.

U.S. foreign policy should reflect and promote those core values – not only because it implicates fundamental human freedoms, but because it serves U.S. national interests.

Violent extremism that threatens U.S. national security flourishes where democratic governance is weak, justice is uncertain, and legal avenues for change are in short supply.

Efforts to reduce poverty and promote broad-based economic growth are more effective and sustainable in a political environment in which fundamental freedoms and the rule of law are respected, government institutions are broadly representative, corruption is held to a minimum.

Regrettably, our human rights and democracy assistance programs continue to face obstacles that impede their effectiveness. With the fragmentation of resources and capabilities, gaps in the delivery of certain types of assistance, and lack of flexibility – be it through presidential initiatives or congressional funding directives – taxpayers simply aren't getting an adequate return on their investment.

While those deficiencies are not unique to human rights and democracy, these programs are particularly sensitive and deserve special attention. We have seen how ham-handed attempts to insert the United States in the political processes of other countries runs the risk of failing to achieve meaningful reform, and even endangering those who have dared to speak out against the policies of their own governments.

To address these problems, we recently released a discussion paper on human rights and democracy assistance – which is available on our committee website – that proposes a number of common-sense solutions to these problems. These proposed reforms – such as requiring action plans to broaden civic participation and prevent human rights abuses, enhancing the democracy and governance functions at USAID, modernizing and codifying existing human rights statutes, and improving training for democracy and human rights officers – will allow us to more effectively assist human rights defenders, promote participatory forms of government, and strengthen the rule of law.

Some may argue that these proposed reforms go too far, while others may say they don't go far enough. Even on those points where there is agreement in principle, there are likely to be many

challenges in operationalizing these ideas. We have tried to find the right balance among a variety of competing objectives – such as increasing flexibility while maintaining consistency, or assisting reformers without compromising their independence.

The purpose of the paper was to generate a robust discussion on these important issues, and we welcome any comments from the witnesses and – at the appropriate time – other stakeholders and members of the public. We will be scheduling meetings and roundtables in the near future for that purpose.

It's worth noting that our democracy assistance does not aim to impose a particular form of government on anyone: these funds help local partners build representative and accountable institutions in their own countries. They take the lead, while we provide the training and resources that will enable them to be more successful. Our programs include activities – often carried out by nongovernmental organizations – such as training judges and journalists, monitoring elections, and encouraging the development of political parties and civil society organizations.

On the human rights front, we have a twofold task: providing support for defenders of internationally-recognized human rights, and ensuring that our aid stays out of the hands of violators.

Finally, I would like to note that additional funding is not the only key to advancing human rights and democracy abroad. Yes, increased resources, such as those proposed by President Obama, will certainly enhance our ability to protect human rights and promote democratic governance. But equally important are our efforts to reform the current system of providing such funding. In order to be responsible stewards of the taxpayers' dollars, we owe it to the American people to make the system we have function in a more effective, transparent, and responsive manner.