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Freedom House

“Fighting Internet Censorship”

U.S. Capitol Building, Room H-137
Tuesday, July 15, 2008 11am

Freedom House invited **U.S. Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ)**, sponsor of the Global Online Freedom Act, and **Jules Maaten**, Member of the European Parliament, and sponsor of the European Global Online Freedom Act to discuss efforts to bar U.S. and European companies like Google, Yahoo! and Microsoft from sharing technology with repressive government that will censor the internet and track personally identifying user information. The event was held in light of a recent high profile lawsuit against Yahoo! for disclosing information that ultimately led to the arrest and torture of a Chinese dissident.

Rep. Chris Smith began by noting that **protecting human rights through legislation is always an uphill battle**. He cited the International Religious Freedom Act, recently honored by President Bush at its 10th anniversary, as suffering from enormous opposition from various presidential administrations despite its successes. He cited sex and labor trafficking laws and anti-Semitism measures that have been very successful, but faced initial opposition from both the Bush and Clinton administrations.

Smith argued that this law is necessary because “internet suppression is the newest way to intimidate dissidents and it intrudes on what could be a liberating technology.” Without the law, Smith argues that U.S. companies are unwilling to stop aiding some of the most repressive dictatorships. **“This is equivalent to high-tech support for secret police.”**

As written, the law would **establish an office at the State Department with a mandate to investigate internet suppression and designate “internet restricting countries.”** The law would also bar U.S. internet companies from revealing personally identifiable information and would impose civil and criminal penalties for violations.

Jules Maaten began by suggesting that the best way to tackle human rights issues is to frame it in the language of economics. As such, Maaten argues that **restricting access to the internet is a barrier to trade**. Additionally, with international agreement, U.S. and European companies have no need to worry about competitive undercutting.

The legislation in Europe would **establish an office within the European Commission that would issue reports on the status of internet freedom worldwide. In addition, the law places assessments on imports and exports from countries that suppress internet freedom.**

When asked about the text of the bill, Smith noted that it previously included a provision dealing with export controls. However with such a provision, it faced “enormous opposition from several

members of the foreign affairs committees,” who stated that **they would have blocked the entire bill, unless removed.** Maaten suggested that the **European bill is not likely to become law until 2010.**

When asked about Chinese response to the bill, Smith stated that **“the Chinese government will likely just accept this because they need this technology.”** In regard to **opposition from the Bush administration, Smith lamented that it was “extremely disappointing, but predictable.”**

Maaten closed the event stating **“We have to act. We cannot leave it to those countries to reign themselves in.”**