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**“Human Rights and Democracy Assistance:
Increasing the Effectiveness of U.S. Foreign Aid”**
U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs
Rayburn House Office Building, Room 2172
June 10, 2010, 9:30 A.M. – 12 P.M.

The **House Committee on Foreign Affairs** held a hearing to explore ways to improve the effectiveness of government efforts to promote democracy and human rights abroad through foreign aid. This was the latest in a series of committee hearings focused on foreign assistance reform, in light of Chairman Berman’s efforts to rewrite the **Foreign Assistance Act of 1961**. The hearing sought to address challenges such as the need for greater coordination between U.S. foreign aid organizations; problems in the current structure, organization, and delivery capacity of aid institutions; and the inherent tension in agencies’ mission to build strong bilateral relationships with foreign governments while standing firm on support for democracy.

To discuss these issues, the Committee—chaired by **Congressman Howard L. Berman** (D-CA) with **Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen** (R-FL) in attendance—requested the testimony of four individuals: **Thomas Carothers**, Vice President for Studies at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; **Lorne W. Craner**, President of the International Republican Institute and former Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor; **Jennifer L. Windsor**, Executive Director of Freedom House; and **Elisa Massimino**, President and Chief Executive Officer of Human Rights First.

Rep. Berman opened the conversation with an affirmation of the importance of U.S. support for democracy and human rights on the international front and an overview of some of the key obstacles that continue to “impede” the effectiveness of U.S. democracy and human rights organizations. Congressman Berman identified fragmentation between the various organizations as a major area for reform, and he indicated further “common sense” reforms proposed by the Committee in [Discussion Paper #3: Human Rights and Democracy](#). Berman also argued that additional funding for democracy and governance programs is *not* the only key to supporting these issues, characterizing reform of the current system of funding as “equally important.”

Rep. Ros-Lehtinen followed up with comments affirming the need for reform and highlighting her concern over reductions in the Obama administration’s requested funding for the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), down 9% from NED funds in Fiscal Year 2009 and 11% from estimated FY2010 levels. Focusing on Iran in particular, she criticized the decision to scrap the State Department’s Iran Democracy Fund and replace it with the Near East Regional Democracy Fund.

Thomas Carothers opened by voicing opposition to concerns expressed by others that the existence of so many U.S. government organizations working to support democracy has undermined coordination and effectiveness, Carothers argued instead that “**having a variety of institutions gives you more flexibility and a greater range of tools**” for promoting democracy. He suggested that the major

problems lie in *how* assistance is currently being delivered and advocated a focus on making each institution work as effectively as possible, not on reducing the number of these institutions.

Carothers then addressed specific steps to improve the effectiveness of **USAID**, by far the largest source of U.S. government assistance for democracy and human rights. Describing USAID as “weighted down” by “cumbersome” bureaucratic procedures that often ultimately make it “ineffective on the ground,” he argued against placing any additional administrative regulations or requirements that would further hamper its effectiveness. He suggested that USAID suffers from an overreliance on American foreign aid officers and advised giving a larger role to local actors in implementing projects. Finally, Carothers called on Congress to take action to “elevate the place of democracy in USAID” by strengthening the internal position of the Office of Democracy and Governance.

Lorne W. Craner opened by noting that Congress has a history of consistently supporting foreign democracy and human rights through key legislative initiatives, often over objections from the executive branch. He emphasized the need to reduce bureaucracy in USAID, improve training of career officials, and institute better coverage across the field. In the absence of major reforms, he expressed support for moving some USAID funds to more flexible organizations, such as the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) and the NED. Craner also endorsed the recommendations of Carothers in his paper, [*Revitalizing Democracy Assistance: The Challenge of AID*](#).

Craner concluded by drawing parallels between the Obama and Reagan Administrations, as both succeeded administrations whose unpopular foreign policy agendas were perceived as taking a misguided approach to democracy and human rights. Consequently, Craner suggested, President Obama currently faces many of the same human rights challenges that Reagan confronted in the early years of his administration. In this context, Craner commended President Reagan’s willingness to make solid strategic and policy commitments to democratic and human rights assistance, rather than “simply noting the importance of freedom in [his Westminster] speech.”

Jennifer Windsor endorsed her colleagues’ assessments of the value of pluralism in U.S. foreign aid organizations and the need to reform structures and the overly bureaucratic “micromanagement” of USAID. She also backed a Committee recommendation to **remove the USAID Office of Democracy and Governance from the Bureau of Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance (DCHA)** and give it the status of a full bureau on par with others, arguing that USAID needs a “strong, central unit” rather than leaving too much in the hands of its field missions.

Windsor then shifted the focus of the conversation to country-specific efforts and problems. She stated that the U.S.’s role in severely repressive countries such as Burma, North Korea, and Iran should be “providing a lifeline” to human rights activists and defenders there, “regardless of whether there are measurable results.” Windsor then addressed the popular trend toward “country ownership” in foreign assistance, cautioning against giving too much “ownership” to antidemocratic governments.

In this light, she harshly criticized the Obama administration’s decision to accept requests by the governments of China, Russia, Uzbekistan, and Egypt for USAID to only provide aid only to organizations registered and approved by the local governments. **Windsor also roundly criticized the Obama administration for its ongoing negotiations toward a potential endowment for the Egyptian government**, calling this type of initiative “the worst kind” of country ownership.

Elisa Massimino welcomed the overall approach of reforms proposed in the Committee’s discussion paper but argued for even more ambitious legislative reform. She outlined three key priorities to realize the reform goals regarding U.S. democracy and human rights assistance: adhering to a policy of “do no harm”; establishing a “clear strategy for affirmative assistance”; and instituting a “whole-of-government approach.” Under each of these headings, Massimino emphasized that U.S. assistance must *not* in any case undermine support for human rights or lend legitimacy to oppressive regimes (do no harm); foreign assistance must be based on “clear strategy” and “operate through multiple chains of assistance” to reach optimal effectiveness (affirmative assistance); and **policy must be consistent and engage all instruments of U.S. government** in fulfilling the twin goals of achieving human rights and democracy, rather than relying only on the State Department and USAID to carry the mission forward.

Following the witnesses’ testimony, **Congressman Berman** expressed concern that democratic and human rights assistance programs appear to lack a record of quantifiable results, and requested specific examples where U.S. programs have achieved success. Windsor cited two Freedom House projects, including a women’s rights initiative in Jordan that succeeded in bringing awareness to inequitable treatment of women in court and led to the creation of a specialized court chamber to hear cases. Craner affirmed that many successes have been achieved on an international scale, while cautioning that “this is not measurable like ‘how many miles of road did you build.’”

Rep. Ros-Lehtinen asked if the **Iran Democracy Fund** should be restored, prompting responses from Windsor, Massimino, and Carothers. Windsor answered that **the real issue is not which agency or department implements the Iran program, but which the tasks the program actually undertakes.** She argued that **priority should be given to political prisoners, refugees, and internet freedom.** Massimino agreed with these priorities, while cautioning that supporting democracy and human rights in Iran is “extremely complicated” and that **“we must be careful not to conflate regime change with support for democracy.”** Meanwhile, Carothers advised policymakers to support democracy in Iran but to be “realistic” about what can be achieved there in comparison to other nations.

Rep. Donald Payne (D-NJ) emphasized the importance of NED and asked how the U.S. could achieve a balance of building democracies abroad without becoming intrusive or imposing American biases on foreign populations. Craner responded that the U.S. must take a hands-off approach and understand that democracy building initiatives will not conclude overnight, but will require decades of investment. Massimino followed up with the critical observation that **the U.S. has enjoyed its greatest successes where it has listened to human rights and democracy activists on the ground** in local countries and responded to their needs.

Rep. Dana Rohrabacher (R-CA) echoed Congressman Berman’s opening statements, asserting that “American policy is much more important than funding” and that monetary assistance must be accompanied by substantive policy actions. The Congressman specifically recognized the establishment of NED as “a huge turning point in the struggle for freedom throughout the world.”

Rep. Chris Smith (R-NJ) indicated his concern about countries that have seen a severe deterioration of human rights and called it a “serious mistake” that the Obama administration has not yet appointed an ambassador-at-large to run the State Department’s Office of International Religious Freedom.

Rep. Gerald Connelly (D-VA) expressed his support for rewriting the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, arguing that Congress must ensure that institutions it supports are “well-structured” to support its aid goals. He then voiced a concern that U.S. democracy and governance efforts too often exhibit a

“top-down approach.” Craner objected, pointing to grassroots initiatives by IRI and the National Democratic Institute (NDI) to train local civil society organizations and political parties abroad.

Rep. David Scott (D-GA) asked whether certain assistance programs should be terminated in countries with poor records on democracy and human rights. Craner expressed a concern that such a termination would not ultimately benefit the *people* of the country. He proposed that limited, narrow types of programs touching on human rights and democratic efforts should be allowed to continue even in highly repressive countries.

Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA) asked what standard is used for evaluating democracies abroad that may take on a different character from the U.S. democratic model, and whether the U.S. should accept the outcome of all elections even if the results are perceived to be against its strategic interests. Carothers argued that **the U.S. must “support a process, not a particular outcome”** and focus not on deciding whether a particular country has an election, but on pushing for better elections.

Rep. Berman (D-CA) followed up in a second round of questioning. He observed that **the State Department’s mission to maintain healthy bilateral relationships with foreign governments, often conflicts with its responsibility to stand firm on democratic reform and human rights**. He specifically cited Egypt as an example where this dynamic has undermined the effectiveness of U.S. foreign assistance. Windsor confirmed that USAID and State Department representatives face this challenge. She proposed including democracy as part of the definition of a good bilateral relationship. In that regard, she called for more incentives for diplomats to prioritize democracy and human rights issues, as required by the ADVANCE Democracy Act passed in 2007.

Rep. Brad Sherman (D-CA) repeated Congressman Berman’s concern regarding the inherent tension in State Department’s mission and cited Libya as a specific example, referring to the State Department’s decision—rescinded only after intense pressure from the legislature—to hand over \$1 million earmarked by Congress for democratic programs in Libya to its dictator, Muammar al-Gaddafi.