EXTENSIONS OF REMARKS

RELIGIOUS GROUPS CHALLENGE GROWING INTOLERANCE IN BELGIUM

HON. CHRISTOPHER H. SMITH

OF NEW JERSEY

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, May 19, 1998

Mr. SMITH of New Jersey. Mr. Speaker, as Chairman of the Subcommittee on International Operations and Human Rights, and as Co-Chairman of the Helsinki Commission, I am alarmed at the growing religious intolerance toward religious minorities that we are observing in Western Europe. I am pleased that a coalition of religious groups is building in Europe to combat the rising intolerance, and in fact a legal challenge to these onerous actions is to be announced in Belgium on May 20.

In the last few years, we have witnessed disturbing government interference in the affairs of religious communities in Western Europe through new religion laws, parliamentary investigations into minority beliefs and religious groups, and new government bureaucracies created to disseminate government propaganda on religious organizations. These new laws, parliamentary investigations and government information centers stigmatize as ''dangerous'' groups such as the Jehovah Witnesses, Baha'i, Hindus, and charismatic Catholic and Protestant groups. These government actions violate the religious liberty principles found in numerous international documents, including the Helsinki Final Act, particularly the commitment to ''foster a climate of mutual tolerance and respect between believers of different communities as well as between believers and non-believers'' found in the Vienna Concluding Document of 1989 (Paragraph 16.2).

In January, I traveled to Moscow with my good friends and colleagues Representatives Frank Wolf and Tony Hall to raise our concerns with the 1997 Russian religion law. There, we met with minority religious groups concerned that the new law would limit their ability to freely practice their faith. While it remains to be seen how this law will be implemented, on its face, the law clearly violates numerous Helsinki human rights principles.

Also in January, another Helsinki Commission delegation led by fellow Commissioner Representative John Porter, raised concerns with the Austrian Government regarding their new law restricting religious freedom. The Austrian law, passed by the Austrian Parliament on December 10, 1997, requires that a religious group prove a 20-year existence in Austria, have a creed distinct from previously registered groups, and have a membership of at least 0.02% of the population or 16,000 members before they are granted full rights under law. The premise extended by the Austrian Government for such intense regulation of religious groups is that the government is responsible for the content of belief available for public consumption, just as the government regulates the quality of food for public consumption. The Austrian Government's opinion that the government must ''approve'' religious belief before it is available for the public reveals a shocking retreat from democratic principles which encourage the free exchange of ideas and the freedom of the individual to choose his or her own religious belief.

Several western European parliaments have or are currently investigating the reporting on the activities of minority religious groups. These parliamentary investigations have also had a chilling effect on religious liberty and appear to cause a public backlash against groups being investigated or labeled ''dangerous.'' For instance, the German Bundestag is currently conducting its investigation into ''dangerous sects'' and ''psycho-groups'' and issued an interim report in January 1998. At the Helsinki Commission's September 1997, hearing, independent evangelical church representatives reported a direct correlation between the harassment, vandalism and threats of violence they experience and the investigation by the German Bundestag's commission.

The French Parliament's 1996 report contained a list of ''dangerous'' groups in order to warn the public against them and the Belgian Parliament's 1997 report had an informal appendix, which was widely circulated, listing 189 groups and included various allegations against many Protestant and Catholic groups, Quakers, Hasidic Jews, Buddhists, and the YWCA.

Equally alarming has been the establishment of government information centers by Western European parliaments to alert the public to ''dangerous'' groups. The Austrian and Belgian Governments have set up hotlines for the public and, through government sponsored advisory centers, distributes information on groups deemed ''dangerous.'' In Austrian Government literature, Jehovah's Witnesses are labeled ''dangerous'' and members of this group report that the stigma associated with this government label is difficult to overcome in Austrian society. These information centers directly violate the commitments that Austria and Belgium have made as participating States of the OSCE to ''foster a climate of mutual tolerance and respect'' and excessively entangle the government in the public discussion on religious beliefs.

On Wednesday (May 20), at the European Parliament, a coalition of religious groups, including Hasidic Jews, Baha'i, Seventh Day Adventist and other leaders from the evangelical Protestant community representing 90 per cent of Belgium's Protestant community, are holding a press conference. They are publishing a petition to the Belgian authorities, announcing the launch of a court challenge to the Belgian Parliamentary Report, and highlighting their concerns over the Belgian Government's Advice and Information Center. The premise of the legal challenge is that these actions by the Belgian Government violate Belgium's international commitments to religious liberty. I commend the work that these and other groups such as Human Rights Without Frontiers are doing to highlight and challenge the governmental actions that violate the Helsinki Accords and other international commitments to religious liberty.

TRIBUTE TO LOU AND JUNE LORCH

HON. BRAD SHERMAN

OF CALIFORNIA

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, May 19, 1998

Mr. SHERMAN. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to pay tribute to Lou and June Lorch for their efforts to improve the quality of life in our community.

Lou and June have exhibited exemplary leadership with their active participation in the Jewish communities of Congregation Beth Kodesh and Shomrei Torah Synagogue. Each has spent countless hours working for the benefit of others, and together they have contributed to the successful development of a growing Jewish community.

Lou's positions and accomplishments illustrate a zest for life and a vigorous dedication to the causes which he supports. At Temple Beth Kodesh, Lou served at various times as Religious Vice President, Ways and Means Vice President, Executive Vice President and as the Men's Club President. After Shomrei Torah Synagogue was formed by the merging of Temple Beth Kodesh and Temple Beth Ami, Lou served as the co-chairman of the High Holy Days seating committee. Currently, he holds a seat on the Jewish National Fund's Board of Directors and the Chatsworth Chamber of Commerce.

June's contributions to the Jewish community embody the spirit of enthusiasm and leadership as well. Having served most notably as Ways and Means Vice President on the Congregation Beth Kodesh Sisterhood Executive Board, she has also held positions including Party Shop Chairperson and Chanukah craft and needlepoint workshops instructor. As a result of her tireless efforts for the community, June was awarded the Chayem Olam award, the Sisterhood's highest honor. In addition, June was named an honorary member of the Men's Club and served as the National Governor of the CAIR Evolution Versus Society.

Besides Lou and June's individual achievements, they have joined forces to chair the Congregational Blood Bank Drive and together played an integral role in planning the synagogue's auction and annual dinner dance.

The Lorch's achievements in the Jewish community highlight a successful career in the insurance industry with the Lorch Insurance Agency. Lou has served as the President of the Independent Insurance Agents and Brokers Association and as the State Director of the California Insurance Agents and Brokers Association. A highlight of his career came in 1988, when he was awarded the prestigious Van Dawson Award. In the past, June has served as the Lorch Insurance Agency's Chief Financial Officer.