

**TESTIMONY OF  
PRINCIPAL DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY  
VIRGINIA BENNETT  
BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND LABOR**

**Before the  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON WESTERN HEMISPHERE,  
TRANSNATIONAL CRIME,  
CIVILIAN SECURITY,  
DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS,  
AND GLOBAL WOMEN'S ISSUES**

**May 5, 2015**

Chairman Rubio, Ranking Member Boxer, distinguished Members of the Committee. Thank you for providing this opportunity for the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor to discuss our work to advance human rights and democracy around the globe. I would like to share with you what we plan to accomplish with the foreign assistance funds we've requested. DRL enjoys strong bipartisan support from Congress, and we are appreciative.

Assistant Secretary Malinowski regrets that he cannot be here today. He is in Asia leading the U.S. Bilateral Human Rights Dialogue with the government of Vietnam.

U.S. advocacy for democracy, human rights, labor, and international religious freedom are critical to our national response to the challenges we face. To continue this important work, DRL's FY16 budget request for Diplomatic and Consular Programs is \$29,432,000 for operations. Our operational budget represents the lifeblood of DRL's policy initiatives on human rights. It covers staff, foreign travel, our human rights report, our international religious freedom

report and engagement. We combine diplomacy with foreign assistance programs around the world that support democracy and human rights promotion. I'd like to focus my remarks today on our foreign assistance request.

DRL has requested \$60 million for the Human Rights and Democracy Fund (HRDF). Approximately \$45 million would be obligated in accordance with the following core priorities:

- Promoting international religious freedom
- Protecting labor rights
- Promoting human rights in China
- Providing emergency assistance to activists
- Ensuring Internet freedom
- Combating Anti-Semitism
- Supporting the rights of persons with disabilities
- Preventing atrocities and transitional justice
- Emergency response for populations at risk

DRL will use the remaining \$15 million to fund other programs across the globe. We provide a global figure in our Congressional Budget Request to allow us to respond to human rights crises or emergencies that arise during the fiscal year. For example, last year, we adjusted our operational plan to support unanticipated free and fair elections in Ukraine. We are currently seeking to assist the new government with post-conflict accountability and reconciliation. We strive to be rapid and responsive, and most of our programs go from inception to implementation in six to eight months.

Our HRDF request represents a critical component of our programming budget, but it does not reflect our entire programming budget. We also receive transfers from regional Economic Support Funds. DRL manages 350 grants a year on average, and implements approximately \$150 million annually in foreign

assistance. In general, ESF transfers are tied to specific countries and projects HRDF allows us to pivot in response to changing conditions. We have created and deployed rapid response assistance to religious freedom, human rights, and labor activists or organizations suffering repression. And we have developed strategic partnerships with other governments and with foundations and corporate donors.

We support the use of new technologies to assist civil society activists and organizations worldwide. We support women; religious and ethnic minorities; indigenous populations; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons. We seek to widen political space in struggling or nascent democracies and authoritarian regimes. We target human rights abuses, particularly in countries that systematically repress fundamental freedoms. And our rapid response programs allow us to react immediately to protect human rights defenders under attack across the globe.

I am confident our programs will accomplish these goals in FY16, as they have in past years. For example, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, DRL funded an initiative to create an SMS-based early warning and response system. This allowed communities in remote areas to alert authorities to threats and outbreaks of violence. These communities were then able to receive quick, comprehensive emergency assistance.

Before this program, it was common for 10 to 15 communities to rely on one communication point to relay messages to UN protection forces. This left communities at the mercy of armed groups who could simply block roads and prevent them from sounding the alarm. DRL's program provided villages with communications tools and provided training to civil community observers, civil protection officers, and rural police officers on how to use the warning system.

Within the first two years, the system received 872 reports from remote villages. It thwarted 38 rebel attacks on villages that are home to approximately 150,000 people.

This program's success has demonstrated that training and communication technologies can empower communities and responders. They reduce response times, and help ensure comprehensive, real-time assistance from protection forces, as well as NGOs providing health or legal services. The provincial government of North Kivu has now taken the lead in managing and expanding these systems.

Last year, DRL launched the Consortium for Truth, Justice and Reconciliation. It comprised nine civil society organizations recognized globally for their expertise on transitional justice mechanisms. Within two weeks of the program's launch, our embassy in Ukraine asked for assistance in responding to the discovery of mass graves in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine. There, Russian-supported separatists continue attacks against the Ukrainian government. The Consortium quickly deployed technical experts to advise the Government of Ukraine and local civil society organizations on establishing processes and procedures to deal with reporting missing persons. They establish procedures for exhuming mass graves, identifying individuals, and preserving forensic information. In the last six months, the Consortium has begun longer-term programs to document ongoing human rights abuses and to promote local reconciliation in Iraq and South Sudan.

I am pleased to highlight the reach and impact our programs have. We are even stronger when we partner with others in defense of human rights. To that end, DRL has forged strategic partnerships with other governments, foundations, and private donors. This maximizes our ability to implement programs in support

of the Bureau's mandate. In many situations, our initial engagement has motivated other U.S. agencies or non-U.S. government donors to provide funding to promote human rights and democracy goals.

For example, we used HRDF to establish a multilateral fund called Lifeline, to provide emergency assistance to civil society organizations under threat for their efforts to advocate for fundamental freedoms. We have since recruited 16 like-minded governments and 2 foundations to contribute to a consortium of seven international human rights organizations. In FY 2014, Lifeline provided emergency assistance to 153 civil society organizations in 68 countries and territories. It also supported 61 advocacy initiatives that raised domestic, regional, or international awareness of a specific threat or restriction on civil society.

Through a public-private partnership with the Avon Foundation and Vital Voices, we established the global Gender-Based Violence Emergency Response and Protection Initiative. This provides emergency assistance to survivors of extreme forms of gender-based violence. In Iraq, the Initiative has supported nearly 50 Yezidi women and girls who have escaped ISIL captivity. The Initiative provides fast, short-term assistance for the most egregious of GBV cases. These targeted grants pay for emergency medical, psychosocial, legal, relocation, shelter, and other related expenses as quickly as 72 hours after a request is made. Both survivors and those threatened with extreme violence are eligible for assistance.

As citizens turn to digital tools to capture and spread information, we have seen authoritarian governments clamp down on rights of expression. In response, we used HRDF to form and fund the Digital Defenders Partnership with several other governments. Since its inception, the Partnership has provided direct emergency support to 55 organizations and 208 individuals facing digital

emergencies, such as a denial of service or malware attack. The Partnership has provided almost 350 organizations with small grants that have allowed them to assess and strengthen the security of their digital systems. Almost 700 individuals have received digital security trainings as a result of Partnership programs. And almost 7 million people have accessed hardware or software that improves their digital security.

DRL used HRDF to establish the Global Equality Fund, a special Gift Fund that allows us to receive funds from like-minded states and private entities in order to protect and promote the human rights of LGBT persons worldwide. Since its launch, we have recruited 10 other governments and 9 private entities to join us. Those partnerships have allowed us to leverage the \$2 million dollars initially invested by DRL into \$20 million of programs. These are protecting and promoting the human rights of LGBT persons in more than 50 countries.

We also enjoy a unique capacity to fund short-term, high-impact programs. In the past year, we pivoted quickly to meet needs identified by our embassies across the world. Since our Fundamental Freedoms Fund was established in 2011, DRL has provided \$19 million to support 76 projects in every region of the world. Our rapid response programs have become an invaluable Department resource. They have involved more than 85 missions worldwide and provided immediate support to activists and organizations in urgent need. In 2014, we expanded the rapid response model to include a consortium of NGOs that can provide immediate technical assistance on transitional justice issues.

DRL's core focus remains closed societies. In those places gross human rights abuses can occur unchecked and activists can be attacked or repressed with impunity. And in such environments, direct U.S. government engagement through

bilateral assistance or even embassies may not be appropriate or possible. Over 90% of our budget goes to programs in such closed or closing societies.

As repressive governments crack down on civil liberties, our programs become ever more vital to answering the Administration's call to assist civil society under threat. We work safely and effectively in spaces where others cannot. We adjust our operating procedures and apply best practices we've developed over years of implementing programs in high-risk environments to do so. We find ways to reach out and support civil society activists, by employing methods aimed at protecting the identity of our beneficiaries and reducing their risk of exposure to oppressive governments. Let me be clear that our programs are overt. They are notified to Congress. We acknowledge them publicly. Indeed, we would be happy to provide this committee with a detailed briefing on our closed society programs. But we work hard not to endanger our partners in high-risk environments, and we take that responsibility seriously.

Our support empowers local NGOs and citizens to press for reforms and build foundations for more accountable governance. We support those promoting freedom of association, freedom of expression, and the right to collective bargaining. We support the efforts of human rights activists as they work to build democratic institutions, support access to justice, create independent media, and document human rights abuses. Our programs help advance international religious freedom, labor and disability rights, and transitional justice, and they promote the rights of marginalized people. We counter religious intolerance, anti-Semitism, and violent extremism. In the face of increasingly sophisticated tactics for disrupting activism online, we promote digital security, help activists obtain independent information, and support policy and advocacy projects in countries that seek to restrict Internet freedom.

Governments that protect human rights and fundamental freedoms are more stable, successful, and secure than those that do not. The United States finds stronger partners in governments that reflect and act in the broad interests of their own people, rather than the narrow interests of the few.

We must continue to seek the release of activists and to make progress on issues of mutual concern, such as disability and labor rights. We must continue supporting civil society, and pressing governments to halt arbitrary detentions, and uphold freedom of expression. We must seize opportunities to make an immediate difference in democracies under threat, or countries in transition.

This is the work of decades, not days. As the 2015 National Security Strategy affirms, “America is uniquely situated—and routinely expected—to support peaceful democratic change.” Careful stewardship of the resources allocated to DRL enables us to advance U.S. foreign policy priorities in this regard, and we stand ready to do our part.

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member Boxer, committee members, your commitment to human rights is well known, and much appreciated. Thank you, again, for holding this hearing. I look forward to answering your questions.