

September 20, 2006:

**Statement: Congressman Robert Wexler, Ranking Democrat
Europe and Emerging Threats Subcommittee
Hearing: Serbia: Current Issues and Future Direction**

Chairman Gallegly, I want to thank you for holding this hearing on Serbia as well as the witnesses testifying before the subcommittee.

It is clear that today's hearing comes at a critical juncture for Serbia and the Balkans given the decision by the Contact Group to give Chief UN mediator Martti Ahtisaari the go ahead to complete by the end of year UN led talks on the status of Kosovo.

Although substantial political, economic and social progress has been made over the past fifteen years in the Balkans and peace and stability have taken hold in South Central Europe there remain several outstanding issues including the status of Kosovo that must be resolved before the region can break completely free from the ethnic conflicts of the 1990's.

Over the next several months the United States, EU and UN must remain deeply engaged in the Balkans in order to build on successful reforms both regionally and in Serbia and to resolve post-conflict problems and cross-border issues. To this end, Serbian Prime Minister Kostunica and President Tadic along with other governments in the region including Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia, Albania and Montenegro -- must have the will power and wherewithal to take difficult steps -- in order for them to fully integrate into Euro-Atlantic institutions.

I strongly believe that lasting peace and security in the Balkans and full integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions -- which is in America and Europe's interest -- can only be successful if Serbia remains a strong and democratic ally of its neighbors and the West.

Almost six years after the fall of former President Slobodan Milosevic -- Serbia has taken significant steps to strengthen their democratic institutions, reform defense institutions, address ethnic tensions in Southern Serbia and build a strong economy. Having had several opportunities to meet face to face with President Tadic to discuss his bold vision of Serbia's future as a full member of the European Union and NATO -- I am hopeful his vision which I also share can be achieved in the near future.

Despite substantial progress pro-democratic forces in Serbia face significant challenges over the coming months that must be taken into account in Washington and Brussels. The biggest threat to Serbia's future in the Euro-Atlantic community is the Radical Party and ultra-nationalists in Serbia who recklessly reject reconciliation and oppose efforts to promote democracy, rule of law and human rights.

I urge Secretary Rice, who recently joined President Tadic in signing a Status of Forces Agreement in Washington, to continue to strengthen bilateral relations with Serbia. The people of Serbia, who face a difficult and emotional decision regarding the future of

Kosovo, need to know that while certain prerequisites for inclusion in Euro-Atlantic institutions including Serbia's capture of General Mladic and implementation of its Action Plan for Hague Cooperation, the United States and EU view Belgrade as a partner and ally in a "Free and Whole Europe."

If the Action Plan at the Hague is implemented to the fullest extent possible it is incumbent on the US and EU to act immediately offering tangible carrots including reinstating the EU Stabilization and Association talks with Serbia and membership in NATO's Partnership for Peace which could be offered at the Riga Summit.

Mr. Chairman, Serb's concerned about their future should know that American considers them an ally and friend and that integrating a democratic Serbia into the Euro-Atlantic community is a top priority of the Bush Administration and Congress. The Balkans is once again at a crossroads and we must be resolute in our determination to bring lasting peace and security to the region.