

Statement of Hon. David Dreier

H. Res. 24

Establishing the House Democracy Assistance Commission for the
One Hundred Tenth Congress

January 30, 2007

Mr. Speaker, I rise in strong support of H. Res. 24. I believe that the House Democracy Assistance Commission began very important work in the 109th Congress, and I appreciate the opportunity to speak on behalf of its reauthorization.

I had the privilege to serve as Chairman of HDAC for nearly two years in the last Congress. I have worked very closely with my good friend, colleague and co-Chair, David Price. Together we have worked to develop what I believe are incredibly important programs with emerging and re-emerging legislatures in virtually every region of the globe. We have six programs already underway -- in Indonesia, East Timor, Lebanon, Kenya, Macedonia and Afghanistan. And we have six programs set to begin this year -- in Liberia, Haiti, Ukraine, Georgia, Colombia and Mongolia.

We all know very well how critical the rule of law, political pluralism, transparency in government, and self-determination are to ensuring a safe, peaceful and prosperous world. And we know all too well that we ignore tyranny to our peril.

Strengthening democratic institutions around the globe is essential to both our national security and to improving the quality of life for millions who previously knew only oppression.

A number of U.S. agencies, NGOs and international groups are doing a great deal of work in democracy building in general, and in legislative strengthening in particular. We work closely with a number of these groups, particularly USAID, IRI and NDI, and we could not do what we do without their assistance and guidance.

But HDAC offers something unique – the perspectives and experiences of Members of the U.S. House of Representatives. Our exchanges provide the opportunity for Members of this body to work directly with Members of legislatures in burgeoning democracies, to offer our experiences and our support at a time when democracy is still fragile. These direct exchanges and personal relationships are invaluable to those on both sides of the table. Our partners can learn from our experience, and we can benefit from the perspective of fellow Members who have only just begun to embark on their democratic experiment.

Our Commission has only existed for a short time – less than two years – and we have only had programs fully underway for a year. Yet we have already begun to see some small but important successes. In general terms, we have begun a dialogue with our colleagues in six

different legislatures, and can see the seeds that have been planted. As these legislatures turn to us on a continual basis for guidance on issues such as ethics reform, oversight and committee strengthening, we can immediately see the value of this ongoing relationship.

And we have seen concrete examples of the positive impact the Commission is having. One example comes from the Kenyan parliament. Our assessment team strongly emphasized the importance of independent budget analysis and we chose to make that a focus of our program.

Through our guidance, the parliament chose to establish a budget committee, and in fact officially launched it during our delegation visit in July of last year.

Another example comes from the Macedonian parliament, where we have focused on the need to strengthen the committee structure and devote adequate resources there. When our assessment team visited the parliament, it found committee facilities and resources to be extremely lacking. By the time our Member delegation visited in November of last year, we saw newly renovated and equipped committee hearing rooms. It was clear that their Leadership was committed to ensuring that committees had the resources they need to be effective in their legislative and oversight roles.

These are incremental but significant successes, demonstrating the value of building Member-to-Member, legislature-to-legislature relationships. For the sake of our six partnerships that are set to begin this year, it is imperative we get our plans underway. And for the sake of our existing partnerships, it is imperative that we build upon the foundation that has been laid over the last two years.

We have heard time and again from our partners that they value enormously this engagement. But they have also emphasized the need for continuity. It's not enough for us to send one delegation there, bring one delegation here, and then call it quits. Seeds have been planted, but a lot of hard work remains to ensure that our gains continue to grow.

For brand new legislatures, like in Afghanistan and Liberia, the stakes of an enduring democracy cannot be overstated. And for more mature institutions with new-found authority, like Ukraine and Colombia, we have an opportunity to ensure that key allies in key regions stay on the path of reform.

I want to express my appreciation to Chairman Lantos and Ranking Member Ros-Lehtinen for their leadership on the Foreign Affairs Committee and their strong support of the Commission, and encourage all my colleagues to reauthorize the House Democracy Assistance Commission so that we as an institution can continue this important work.