

Remarks on House Concurrent Resolution 415, “Condemning the repression of the Iranian Baha’i community and calling for the emancipation of Iranian Baha’is,” by Reps. Ros-Lehtinen, Lantos, Kirk, and Jackson-Lee

September 19, 2006

Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (FL)

Ms. ROS-LEHTINEN. Madam Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Madam Speaker, I rise in strong support of House Concurrent Resolution 415, introduced by my colleague from Illinois, Mr. KIRK. H. Con. Res. 415 condemns the repression of the Iranian Baha’i community and calls for their emancipation. This resolution notes the long-standing concern by Congress for the protection and status of religious minorities in Iran. The resolution requests that the President call for the Government of Iran to emancipate the Baha’i community and guarantee them basic freedoms in accordance with international and human rights standards and obligations. It emphasizes that Iran’s treatment of religious minorities and human rights practices are a significant consideration for the U.S. in formulating our policy toward the Iranian regime.

The Baha’i faith originated in Iran during the 19th century, and their community is one of the largest minorities in religion in Iran. The current government recognizes them as not in true keeping with the faith of the Iranian regime. They are not allowed to practice their faith, and they are further undermined by their inability to maintain contact with Baha’is living abroad.

Baha’is are discriminated against in nearly every sector of Iranian society. In October of 2005, the text of a secret Iranian Government document calling for the identity and monitoring of all Baha’is living in Iran became public. According to Human Rights Watch, Madam Speaker, the anti-Baha’i letter came amid a campaign in the state-run press that began 1 year ago.

Madam Speaker, I recommend that all interested parties who want to learn more about the plight of religious minorities in Iran read the recently released “‘International Religious Freedom Report” published by our Department of State. This report reaffirms the brutal and oppressive nature of the regime in Tehran. The persecution of the Iranian Baha’is is but one grim example in point.

Madam Speaker, as a cosponsor of this resolution, I strongly support the passage of House Concurrent Resolution 415, and I ask my colleagues to vote “‘yes.’”

Madam Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Rep. Tom Lantos (CA)

Mr. LANTOS. Madam Speaker, I yield myself such time as I may consume.

Madam Speaker, I rise in strong support of this resolution. First, I would like to congratulate my good friend and colleague, Congressman MARK KIRK, for his leadership and strong voice in the defense of Baha’i communities all over the world. I am proud to be the original Democratic cosponsor of this important resolution.

The Baha’is are Iran’s largest religious minority, but because the Baha’i faith is not one of the four religions recognized by the Iran Constitution, Baha’i do not have rights under Iranian law. Iranian courts have ruled that people who injure or kill Baha’is are not liable for damages

because the Baha'is are "unprotected infidels." The absurdity of the statement that they are "unprotected infidels" says a great deal about this regime.

Congress has long recognized the plight of this suffering community. Since 1982, we have passed eight resolutions condemning the treatment of the Baha'i in Iran. On March 28 of this year, the White House expressed concern for a worsening situation of the Baha'i in Iran and called on the Government of Iran to respect the religious freedom of its minorities.

Madam Speaker, the situation of the Baha'i in Iran has deteriorated dramatically over the past year with an increase in arbitrary arrests, raids on private homes and imprisonments, a defamation campaign in the government-sponsored press and the continued denial of access to higher education to young men and women of the Baha'i faith.

Iran must grant the Baha'i their full human rights, as this resolution makes crystal clear. Our resolution calls on the Government of Iran simply to grant Baha'i the rights guaranteed by international law. Iran, Madam Speaker, is a signatory to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and several other human rights treaties, but it is obvious that Tehran has no more intention of observing the requirements of these agreements than it does the nuclear agreements it has signed.

The international community must not be mocked. It must hold Iran to those standards to which it has voluntarily committed itself. In fact, Iran's contempt for basic human rights standards knows no bounds. Earlier this year, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei ordered the Ministry of Information, the Revolutionary Guard and the police force to identify Baha'is and collect information on their activities. This is particularly worrisome in light of the Iranian Government's view of the Baha'is as non-persons.

The Anti-Defamation League has called this order "reminiscent of the laws imposed on European Jews in the 1930s by Nazi Germany." Our resolution rightly highlights this order, which was revealed by the U.N. Special Rapporteur for Freedom of Religion or Belief.

Madam Speaker, the U.S. Congress needs to speak out strongly against these policies. We cannot stand by quietly as another pogrom against the Baha'is is quietly being prepared by the bigoted regime of Iran. We and the international community must put Iran on notice that such action is utterly intolerable.

Madam Speaker, I urge all of my colleagues to support this important resolution.

Madam Speaker, I reserve the balance of my time.

Rep. Mark Kirk (IL)

Mr. KIRK. Madam Speaker, I thank the gentlewoman for yielding.

Madam Speaker, I rise in strong support of this resolution, which condemns the Government of Iran's repression of the Baha'i community. I would like to thank my very good friend, Congressman TOM LANTOS, for joining me as the Democratic cosponsor of this important human rights resolution.

The North American Baha'i Temple is located in Wilmette, Illinois, inside my congressional district. It is a magnificent house of worship, gracing Lake Michigan's shoreline.

The Baha'i faith, founded nearly 150 years ago on principles of peace and tolerance, is one of the fastest growing religions in the world. Yet since the Iranian revolution of 1979, the Government of Iran has intensified a deliberate campaign of discrimination, harassment, detention, arrest and imprisonment against the 300,000 members of the Iranian Baha'i community.

The plight of the Iranian Baha'is has significantly deteriorated during the last year. On March 20 of this year, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief revealed the existence of a confidential letter by the chairman of the Command Headquarters of Iran's armed services to Iran's intelligence services, military and police. In this letter, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini instructed Command Headquarters to identify all Baha'is and collect any and all information on their activities and addresses.

Our Anti-Defamation League recently compared this secret letter to steps taken against the Jews in Europe in the 1930s, and yet the secret order has not happened in isolation.

Over the past 18 months, Iranian security forces have begun imprisoning Baha'is without charges, and Baha'i youth in Iran have been denied access to university.

Further, since October of 2005, there has been a campaign of vilification against Baha'is in Kayhan, the government-sponsored press.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom recently released in its 2006 annual report citing numerous egregious human rights violations committed by Iranian Government officials against Baha'is in Iran. The report says that, "In the past year, dozens of Baha'is were arrested, detained, interrogated and subsequently released after, in some cases, weeks or months in detention. Charges typically ranged from 'causing anxiety in the minds of the public and of officials' or 'spreading propaganda against the regime.' "

Clearly detentions based on claims of causing anxiety or spreading propaganda show a growing weakness in the Iranian regime.

That Congress is considering this resolution today is particularly significant. The Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad will address the United Nations General Assembly today to call for all developing countries to join him in confronting the West. It is incumbent on Congress to reveal the real truth about this Iranian leader. We must demonstrate to the international community that while Iran's President has become a ruthless dictator who espouses hatred, discrimination and tyranny, the United States is standing for liberty and toleration and human rights and freedom, especially for Baha'is in Iran.

Mr. Speaker, I urge my colleagues to support this resolution, and I would like to thank our ranking member Congressman LANTOS for his friendship and support on this measure, a tireless advocate, a Holocaust survivor, a man who knows when the authorities call for the names and addresses of a particular minority what the next step is.

We have seen this before, and I want to particularly thank Chairman HYDE and Chairwoman ROS-LEHTINEN for their strong support, upon whom this resolution would not be coming to the floor on this crucial day in which the Iranian dictator speaks before the United Nations.

Finally, I would also like to thank Kit Bigelow and Aaron Emmel from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States for their dedication to their afflicted coreligionists inside Iran.

Rep. Sheila Jackson-Lee (TX)

Ms. JACKSON-LEE of Texas. Madam Speaker, I rise today in support of H.Con.Res.415, condemning the repression of the Iranian Baha'i community and calling for the emancipation of Iranian Baha'is.

I have long been an advocate of a free, independent, and democratic Iran; an Iran that does not destabilize the region, that does not threaten its neighbors, and that honors its commitments to the international community, especially on the issue of the proliferation of nuclear weapons. Since 1982, Congress has declared eight times that it deplors the religious persecution of the Baha'i community in Iran and that we hold the government of Iran responsible for upholding the rights of all Iranian nationals, especially members of the Baha'i faith. It is with dismay that I state that this persecution continues unabated and that the time has come for us as a nation of conscious to take action.

Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, the Iranian government has demonstrated its propensity to engage in systematic persecution and discrimination of the more than 300,000 Baha'is who live in Iran. Bahai's constitute Iran's largest religious minority and over the past quarter century, more than 200 Baha'is have been summarily executed or condemned to death. Thousands more have been imprisoned, detained, assaulted, and harassed.

On March 20, 2006, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief revealed the existence of a confidential letter dated October 29, 2005, from the Chairman of the Command Headquarters of Iran's Armed Forces stating that the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, had instructed the Command Headquarters to identify members of the Baha'i faith in Iran and to monitor their activities. The U.N. Special Rapporteur expressed "grave concern and apprehension" about the implications of this letter for the safety of the Iranian Baha'i community.

For years, I have been a supporter of the democratic movement in Iran, and today more than ever, the people of Iran need to be supported, empowered, and protected. In 2005, the Iranian government initiated a new wave of assaults, home raids, harassment and detentions of members of the Baha'i faith; 129 Baha'is are currently awaiting trial for, among other things, charges of "creating anxiety in the minds of the public and those of the Iranian officials." I find this simply unacceptable and call on my colleagues to condemn this form of religious repression.

The only effective way to achieve lasting peace and prosperity in the region, along with effectuating reforms in Iran's polity, is assisting the Iranian people in general and members of the Baha'i faith in particular in their quest to achieve political, social, and religious liberty.

Every government can be judged with the way in which it treats its ethnic and religious minorities. The current Iranian government gets a failing grade for its treatment of the 300,000 Baha'i who live throughout the regions of Iran. I hold the government of Iran responsible for upholding the rights of the Baha'i community and call on the government of Iran to cease repressive activities aimed at Iran's Baha'i. I consider the Iranian government's human rights record as a significant factor in our foreign policy towards Iran and call for President Bush and the leaders of nations around the world to demand that the government of Iran emancipate the Baha'i community by granting those rights guaranteed to them by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights covenants.

I urge my colleagues to support this important resolution condemning the repression of the Iranian Baha'i community and calling for the emancipation of Iranian Baha'is.