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House Foreign Affairs Committee  
Hearing: Human Rights Under Siege Worldwide

Thank you, Chairman Royce and Ranking Member Engel for holding this important hearing on “Human Rights Under Siege Worldwide.” On behalf of the Human Rights Campaign’s more than one and a half million members and supporters nationwide, the nation’s largest organization working to achieve equal rights for the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community, HRC strongly supports the committee’s efforts to engage this issue and to provide a space for examining the human rights of LGBTQ people around the world.

The attention this committee gives to human rights is always important and useful, and I am particularly gratified that the committee has included a witness who is testifying specifically on issues related to the human rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people. This is the first time that has happened in a full Congressional committee and I urge you to make sure it won’t be the last.

It is important that this committee focus on LGBTQ human rights for a number of reasons, not least of which is that it is in our national interest.

For a number of years, the treatment of LGBTQ people in places around the globe has been a leading indicator of a country’s dedication to human rights and good governance. Countries that respect LGBTQ rights have also by and large demonstrated strong support for civil society as a whole.

In far too many countries where we have seen unfortunate rollbacks in freedoms of expression, we have often seen a simultaneous crackdown on the LGBTQ community. From Nigeria, which passed the Same Sex Marriage Prohibition Act in 2014, to Russia, which has led the globe in clamping down on so-called “homosexual propaganda,” we have seen civil society space narrowing at the same time that LGBTQ people have seen their own human rights threatened. In Turkey, a country that once seemed to be on the cusp of joining the community of European democracies, now seems headed in the opposite direction, with arrests of journalists, and now repeated crackdowns on what was once the largest LGBTQ pride parade in the Muslim world.

These setbacks have real consequences for the U.S. and our national interests. A world that is more free and tolerant is one that will lead to more stability and more peace, since countries that respect human rights and freedoms have a proven track record of greater stability and peace. It is therefore in the U.S. interest to promote all freedoms around the world, especially for LGBTQ people, who act as a sort of “canary in the coal mine”: when their freedoms are abrogated it usually sends a signal of the general decline in the freedoms and stability of the country in which they live. As President Obama said in his 2015 State of the Union address, the United States must “defend free speech, and advocate for political prisoners, and condemn the

persecution of women, or religious minorities, or people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender...not only because they are the right thing to do, but because ultimately they will make us safer.”

Nowhere have we seen this more acutely in recent years than in areas controlled by the Islamic State (ISIL). ISIL has accused dozens of men of having same-sex relations and then thrown them off of buildings, stoned them or even worse, while videotaping their crimes as a “warning” to others. LGBTQ people living in and around those areas have rightly felt themselves under extreme threat and have fled to Turkey, Jordan, and other countries, seeking refuge from the persecution and violence. HRC has therefore produced a [paper](#) that outlines the challenges facing LGBTQ people in and around ISIL-controlled territory and lays out some of the ways that the U.S. can help to move them to safety.

And yet at the same time, the threat from ISIL has spread, as we have seen people who claim allegiance to ISIL killing LGBTQ people in Bangladesh, and of course in Orlando. As we saw exactly one month ago today, virulent anti-LGBTQ hatred, a hatred that can kill more than four dozen innocent men and women, some as young as 18 years old, can reach our shores and kill American citizens. As with so many other problems, we do better if we fight this problem abroad, to stop its metastization there, before it kills our citizens once again.

It is therefore critically important that the committee is holding this hearing and focusing on this issue, and there are also a number of other ways that this committee to use its powers to assist LGBTQ people around the world.

First, this committee should consider two important pieces of legislation pending before it: the Global Respect Act and the International Human Rights Defense Act.

- The Global Respect Act (H.R. 2368) was introduced by a member of this committee, Rep. David Cicilline (D-RI) in May 2015 and has 46 cosponsors. It would require the administration to submit a list to Congress of foreign persons who are "responsible, or acted as an agent, for extrajudicial killings, torture, or other gross violations of internationally recognized human rights committed against an individual in a foreign country based on actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity." People on that list would be ineligible for entry to the U.S.
- The International Human Rights Defense Act (H.R. 590), was introduced by another member of this committee, Rep. Alan Lowenthal (D-CA) in January 2015 and has 63 cosponsors. That bill would make it U.S. policy "to take effective action to prevent and respond to discrimination and violence against all people on any basis internationally, including sexual orientation and gender identity." As part of that, it would codify the State Department position of Special Envoy for the Human Rights of LGBTI Persons and authorize the State Department and USAID to provide assistance to prevent and respond to discrimination and violence against LGBT people.

Congress should also ensure that this country remains a place that welcomes refugees. LGBTQ people in particular view the U.S. as a beacon of hope, a place where they can flee to in order to live out their lives free from fear and the specter of death looming over them. In the wake of attacks in Paris and San Bernadino, there has been an impulse in some quarters to shut our doors to refugees who are fleeing the very same kind of violence that was perpetrated in France and California. But not only would that be inhumane, it would also send the wrong signal to those who are threatened by, or standing up to, ISIL. The United States must not surrender to nativist instincts when so many people need our help and need to flee to safety.

Leaders and members of this committee can also use their influence when meeting with foreign leaders to impress upon them the support of the U.S. Congress for LGBTQ human rights at home and abroad. As has been evident in far too many cases, there are many global leaders who do not consider the basic human rights and dignity of LGBTQ people to be worthy of their attention. They believe that LGBTQ people are “deviant” and therefore deserving of scorn, or worse.

Members of this committee should also avail themselves of opportunities to meet with LGBTQ advocates and activists around the globe who are making incredible strides in expanding their human rights and protections, often against seemingly-insurmountable odds. The Human Rights Campaign has been honored to work with many of them, and to host them here in Washington, and they are truly an inspiration for what a group of dedicated, passionate and well-organized people can achieve. In Uganda, for example, the notorious Anti-Homosexuality Act was overturned by the Supreme Court on a technicality, and the bill has not yet returned to parliament, largely due to the advocacy of local Ugandan LGBTQ people.

However, they still face enormous obstacles in their countries, not least of which is funding. While the State Department and USAID have made some grants to LGBTQ groups through the Global Equality Fund and other mechanisms, Congress could help by allocating higher sums through the annual appropriations process. I urge this committee to work with colleagues in the House Appropriations Committee to increase funding for LGBTQ groups abroad who are fending off legislation, policies and rhetoric that place a target on their backs.

Thank you again for holding this important hearing. I look forward to working with you and your colleagues to continue raising this important issue and bring it more attention and focus.