Statement of Rep. Christopher H. Smith, Co-Chairman
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe

"Belgium's Chairmanship of the OSCE"
June 28, 2006

Mr. Chairman, thank you for convening this hearing on Belgium's leadership of the OSCE, an organization that has stood the test of time in promoting the core values of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. I appreciate this opportunity to renew my acquaintance with Minister De Gucht given our common interests within the OSCE and beyond. Last year Dr. Henry Kissinger met with the Commission in conjunction with the 30th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act. He acknowledged the unanticipated impact of ideas reflected in that document and the process it produced that has made human rights a legitimate subject of international debate. Indeed, the Helsinki Process and contribution of this Commission have helped uphold the freedom and dignity of many individuals – but many others wait for the promises made in Helsinki to be fulfilled.

For those committed to democracy and respect for human rights, we are here to help you overcome the legacy of the past. To those despots determined to remain in power at all costs, the day is coming when your people too will say "enough" to official corruption, rigged elections, and chronically poor governance. Regrettably, the gap between commitment and reality on the ground in a number of OSCE participating States remains wide and, in at least a couple of countries, is growing alarmingly wider. The failure of some to adhere to longstanding OSCE commitments is indeed leading to a division between those committed to building, consolidating and strengthening democracy and those determined to thwart democratic change.

This past March we witnessed these decidedly different approaches being played out in Belarus and neighboring Ukraine. In the first, we saw a sad repeat of the rigged elections that have robbed the people of Belarus of a voice in choosing a path toward democracy and away from dictatorship. A week later, the people of Ukraine used the ballot box to consolidate the gains of the Orange Revolution through the first post-Soviet elections to be deemed completely free and fair.

Turning to Central Asia, I remain deeply concerned over the continuing and intensifying repression in Uzbekistan and was appalled to see President Putin host Karimov on the eve of the anniversary of the bloody Andijon massacre. Denial of even a glimmer of freedom on Turkmenistan has become so routine that regrettably few pay much attention to the hardship of the people in that country. Meanwhile, factions in Kyrgyzstan seem more determined to gain advantage than to consolidate change made possible through upheaval that toppled dictatorship there. In Tajikistan, a country that had to contend with the ravages of civil war, the political space in the lead up to elections later this year appears to be shrinking. Finally, Kazakhstan, a country many had hoped would provide real leadership in embracing OSCE commitments and leading by example, has failed to improve its already poor record on human rights and democracy, thus dooming its nascent bid to assume the chairmanship of OSCE in 2009.

Ironically, those insisting on the need for "reforms" of the OSCE are countries that routinely and often blatantly ignore their commitments on human rights and democracy. This group is not interested in strengthening the OSCE, but scuttling the organization's human rights and democracy-promoting activities. We should not allow our attention to be diverted from the real issue -- implementation of agreed upon commitments.

Mr. Minister, as the point person on human trafficking issues for the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, I want to stress the importance of pursuing robust anti-trafficking efforts even as you seek a qualified candidate to serve as Special Representative. In this regard, it is critical to move ahead now, including the follow-up this fall on the issue of forced and bonded labor. Momentum must not be lost on such important ongoing efforts!

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.