

MEMBERS CRITICIZE CROATIAN GOVERNMENT IN LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT -- (BY BOJAN KLIMA) (Extension of Remarks - March 17, 1998)

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HON. EDOLPHUS TOWNS

in the House of Representatives

TUESDAY, MARCH 17, 1998

- Mr. TOWNS. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to inform my colleagues of a letter to President Clinton expressing the deep concern of members about the Croatian government's authoritarian and non-democratic actions. Because the United States is sending financial aid to Croatia we must monitor the situation. I am inserting a copy of this letter along with a translation of a related March 13, 1998 Voice of America boardcast.

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

Hon. **William Jefferson Clinton**,
President of the United States,
The White House, Washington, DC.

Dear Mr. President: We are writing to express our deep concern regarding the Croatian government's continued pattern of intolerance toward the basic freedoms of political expression, a free press, and civil liberties. While we expected that the transition from a former communist republic to a democracy would not happen overnight, it has been seven years since Croatia declared itself an independent democratic nation, and little progress has been made in implementing democratic reforms. This was recently reaffirmed by the State Department's Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 1997. In its report, the State Department makes the finding that in Croatia `the continuing concentration of power within the one-party central government, makes Croatia's nominally democratic system in reality authoritarian.'

Most print and broadcast media continue to be owned by the Croatian government resulting in considerable restriction on freedom of the press. Journalists who criticize the government face harassment and even prosecution. the Association of Electronic Media Journalists was established in October 1997, and issued a manifesto (`Forum 21') with 21 points calling for professional and open electronic media. The State Department found `13 of members who worked for state radio and television, came under immediate pressure and threats from the HDZ [President Tudjman's party] and the state-run media to curtail these outside

activities.' The State Department further reported 'The Government maintained an unofficial campaign of harassment of the independent media throughout the year.'

In August 1997, the Croatian government brought charges against two prominent human rights activists, Ivan Cicak, long-time President of the Croatian Helsinki Committee, and politician Dobroslav Paraga, President of the Croatian Party of Rights 1861. The government alleged that both men had violated the Criminal Code by disseminating false information with the intent of causing political instability in the country. According to the State Department Report, '. . . the same and similar statements had been made by these individuals--with no ensuing public disorder--several years previously and that similar sentiments were expressed by others.' The charges were brought against these men within days of their meeting with the investigators from The Hague War Crimes Tribunal in which they turned over documentation involving allegations against several high government officials.

In addition, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) found the presidential election in June of 1997 to be 'fundamentally flawed' and came to a similar conclusion with regards to the parliamentary and local elections in April 1997. The President's ruling party was given an overwhelming advantage in coverage by the state-owned electronic media throughout the election year. Furthermore, there is a disturbing trend over the past few years by the Croatian government to use administrative courts to replace heads of democratically elected parties. The method is simple, the party is registered as being headed by someone who is favored by the ruling party.

The judicial system continues to be heavily influenced by the Croatian Administration. In 1997, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Krunislav Olujic, was dismissed. Three members of the State Judiciary Council were witnesses against him while at the same time they also decided his fate. The OSCE reported that Olujic's dismissal 'put in question the separation of powers provided for by the Constitution.'

Mr. President, we believe it is well past the time for Croatia to hold fair and free elections based on election laws which do not favor the ruling party over the opposition. The government should return democratically elected leaders of Parliamentary parties who were removed by administrative measures. There must be multi-party control of the election process. An independent media must be allowed to report without fear of reprisal, and the judiciary must be independent from any political influence. We therefore urge you to increase the pressure on the Croatian government to come in line with internationally recognized democratic principles through all means at your disposal, including the disbursement of U.S. assistance.

Sincerely,

Tom Lantos, Tom Campbell, Tony P. Hall, John Edward Porter, Martin Frost, Henry J. Hyde, Benjamin A. Gilman, Luise V. Gutierrez, William O. Lipinski, Edolphus Towns, Jesse L. Jackson Jr., Joel Hefley.

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(BY BOJAN KLIMA)

A group of very influential American Congressmen recently sent a letter to President Bill Clinton and submitted a resolution to the U.S. Congress. The lawmakers wanted to increase the pressure on the Croatian government to come in line with fundamental democratic principles. The Congressmen urged the American President that he use all means at his disposal, including disbursement of U.S. assistance. Among the many distinguished cosponsors and signatures are influential Benjamin Gilman, Chairman of the International Relations Committee, Congressman Tom Lantos, a member of this Committee, and Congressman Henry Hyde. What is the reason for this contact with President Clinton?

The lawmakers expressed deep concern regarding the Croatian government's continued pattern of intolerance toward the basic freedoms of political expression. In these documents the Congressmen spoke of freedom of expression, freedom of media and several violations against civil rights of individuals. For example, they wrote that the government has control of most of the electronic and print media. Journalists who criticize the government face harassment and even persecution. One example, the American State Department found thirteen journalist, who worked for State radio and television and who are members of Forum 21, received pressure and threats because they are members of this independent group.

In the letter to the President the U.S. Congressmen quoted two cases, Ivan Cicak and Dobroslav Paraga, who were charged in August for violating the Criminal Code by disseminating false information with the intention of causing political instability in the country. The Congressmen wrote in the letter to President Clinton that charges were brought against these men within days of their meeting with investigators from the Hague War Crimes Tribunal to whom they had turned over documentation involving allegations against several high government officials. U.S. lawmakers quoted some other examples of the non-democratic nature of the political system in the Republic of Croatia. Media presentation of the electoral campaign during the last presidential election was so non-objective that the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) proclaimed the election 'unfair.' Furthermore, there is a disturbing trend by the Croatian government to use administrative courts to replace heads of democratically-elected parties. Instead of the democratically-elected heads, the party is registered as being headed by someone who is favored by the ruling party. And the judicial system continues to be heavily influenced by the ruling party. The U.S.

Congressmen cited the dismissal of Krunislav Olujic, the President of the Supreme Court of Croatia and referred to the report of OSCE that Olujic's dismissal put in question the separation of powers provided for the Constitution.

The American Congressmen wrote the American President that while they had not expected that democracy would happen overnight in a former communist republic, they found it regrettable the Republic of Croatia has made very little progress toward democracy development in the last seven years. They urged President Clinton to increase pressure on the Croatian government to carry out several demands: first, that Croatia should hold fair and free elections based on election laws which do not favor the ruling party over the opposition; second, the government must return democratically-elected leaders of Parliamentary parties who were removed by administrative measures; third, their must be multi-party control of the election process; and fourth that journalists and judges must be allowed to function without fear of reprisal or political repression. Finally, these very influential American Congressmen requested of President Clinton that he increase the pressure on the Croatian government to come in line with internationally-recognized democratic principles. The Congressmen requested that President Clinton use all means at his disposal, including U.S. economic assistance.

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