

**Statement of Rep. Alcee L. Hastings
Chairman
Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe**

"Armenia after the Election"

April 17, 2008

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to this hearing on "Armenia after the Election." 2008 has already gone down as a memorable year in the Caucasus. Some of you may have attended our February hearing on the Georgian election, which was also controversial. We will see in the fall how Azerbaijan's presidential contest turns out.

As everyone here knows, the reemergence last year into the political arena of former President Levon Ter-Petrossian energized what seemed like a quiet campaign with a predictable outcome. The unusual circumstances of his departure from office in 1998 undoubtedly helped produce the heated rhetoric that followed his entry into the race.

Ultimately, according to official tallies, Prime Minister Serzh Sarkissian won the February 19 election with almost 53 per cent of the vote. Levon Ter-Petrossian got about 21 per cent, with two other leading politicians who campaigned as opposition candidates winning over 16 and six per cent, respectively. The OSCE observation mission noted the need for further improvements but concluded that the election had by and large met international standards.

Nevertheless, Levon Ter-Petrossian and his supporters charged fraud and organized an ongoing demonstration in Yerevan's central square. The protests continued for days, attracting considerable crowds, until March 1. At that point, according to the authorities, some of the demonstrators sought to stage a coup d'etat and law enforcement agencies had to restore order by force. In the ensuing state of emergency, independent media were shut down and rallies banned.

The demonstrators, for their part, reject official allegations of violent intentions or actions. They accuse the authorities of brutally attacking a peaceful assembly protesting the theft of the people's will.

Wherever the truth lies, the confrontation resulted in at least eight fatalities and many injuries. That was most regrettable. I understand that in the last few days, two more people have died. Allow me to express my condolences to all the victims' families.

The OSCE Chairman in Office condemned the violent crackdown. Other international organizations and foreign capitals followed suit, forcing Yerevan to defend itself to a skeptical international community.

Subsequently, two prominent opposition candidates reached agreement with Serzh Sarkissian to join forces. The four parties in this coalition represent, according to the figures provided by the Central Election Commission, about 75 per cent of the electorate.

Nevertheless, tensions remain high. The state of emergency was officially lifted on March 21 but restrictions on freedom of assembly continue in effect, drawing criticism from the Council of Europe and the OSCE. And while Serzh Sarkissian has been sworn in, some opposition leaders refuse to recognize the election's outcome. About 100 people imprisoned after March 1 are still in jail. Perhaps most important, Armenian society seems to be split into pro-government and fervently anti-government camps.

This chain of events has caused serious damage to Armenia's reputation. The purpose of our hearing is to examine the ramifications of these developments for Armenia and the United States. What should we conclude about the credibility of the official election results? In that connection, what can we say about the state of democracy in Armenia? And how can we in Congress and the Executive Branch help Armenia overcome the obvious problems it is encountering on its path to democracy?

Of special interest are the implications for the ongoing OSCE negotiations on Nagorno-Karabakh and Armenia's qualifications for U.S. assistance from the Millennium Challenge Account.

Our three witnesses, representing the U.S. Government, the Armenian Government and the Armenian opposition, will give us critical perspectives on these issues. For now, I would like to turn to my colleagues, for any remarks they may have.