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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

U.S. describes Azerbaijan as strategic important partner



Washington, D.C— June 12, 2014--- The Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (U.S. Helsinki Commission) has held a hearing on security, economic and human rights dimensions of the U.S.-Azerbaijan relations.

Hearing titled "The Security, Economic and Human Rights Dimensions of U.S.-Azerbaijan Relations" was took place at the Russell Senate Building on Capitol Hill on June 11, AzerTag news agency reported.

The purpose of the hearing as presented by Senator Ben Cardin, the Chairman of the U.S. Helsinki Commission, was to discuss key issues in the U.S.-Azerbaijani relations before the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly Annual Session which will kick off in Baku at the end of June.

The witnesses invited to testify were Tom Melia, Deputy Assistant Secretary at Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor of the U.S. Department of State; Eric Rubin, Deputy Assistant Secretary from the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs of the U.S. Department of State; Miriam Lanskoj, Director for Russia and Eurasia at National Endowment for Democracy (NDI); and Brenda Shaffer, Visiting Researcher at Center for Eurasian, Russian and East European Studies of Georgetown University.

Senator Cardin noted at the event that Azerbaijan has been helpful to the United States and its allies, and its efforts in Afghanistan, especially since the Northern Distribution Network (NDN) relied heavily on Azerbaijan. "Azerbaijan is a strategic important partner to the United States."

Cardin expressed appreciation for the position of Azerbaijan and its vote at the United Nations General Assembly on the territorial integrity of Ukraine.

He also said that the two countries had important strategic partnership on the issue of counterterrorism. Speaking of the U.S.-Azerbaijan economic relations, Cardin said Azerbaijan's oil and gas resources were of much interest to the U.S. and that it was remarkable that Azerbaijan was EITI-compliant (Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative) which was commendable from the standpoint of the U.S. Helsinki Commission that has always been a proponent of transparency in the extractive industries. Rubin, in turn, said the partnership of the U.S. with Azerbaijan remained "an important aspect" of Washington's engagement in the Caucasus.

Rubin said for over twenty years, the U.S. has been working with Azerbaijan to promote a secure, prosperous and democratic society, noting that since 1992, the U.S. provided approximately \$1.1 billion in assistance to pursue those goals. Rubin noted that Azerbaijan had been a "key partner for the United States and NATO from Kabul to Kosovo."

With 94 troops currently on the ground in Afghanistan, Azerbaijan has already committed to remain to post-2014 Afghanistan. It had also completed its missions to Iraq and Kosovo.

Rubin also underlined the importance of Azerbaijan in the NDN and air-route for non-combat goods in and out of Afghanistan, stating that "thousands of containers go through customs and thousands of state and commercial flights transit Azerbaijan each year."

Touching upon the Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, Rubin said the United States, as co-chair to the OSCE Minsk Group worked diligently with its Russian and French co-chairs to facilitate a peaceful settlement to the conflict.

He further spoke of long years of cooperation between the two countries in the energy sphere, where both sides saw through the realization of Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) project which began transporting Azerbaijani oil from the Caspian fields to the Mediterranean in June 2006.

Apart from the energy products, Rubin underlined the importance of business engagements in non-oil industry, such as purchasing by Azerbaijan of U.S.-made airplanes, a communication satellite and agricultural equipment and technology, as well as significance of Washington's support for Azerbaijan being admitted to World Trade Organization (WTO).

Next witness, Melia spoke of the human rights dimension in the U.S.-Azerbaijan relationship.

Melia said the U.S. government recognized that Azerbaijan was located in a very difficult neighborhood and supported Azerbaijan's long-term stability, security and prosperity.

Furthermore, responding to Cardin's question on the concern of Azerbaijani citizens on the territorial integrity of their country, Rubin said "the principle of territorial integrity and sovereignty that we're defending in Ukraine applies to all of the countries of the region."

He noted that the United States was committed to helping Azerbaijan strengthen its ability to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity. As far as OSCE's role in conflict resolutions is concerned, Rubin said OSCE has been the premier organization mediating between Armenia and Azerbaijan through its Minsk Group and although the breakthrough was not expected this year, there has been some progress in the peace talks. He noted that the main present framework of negotiations was based on the Madrid Principles.

In response to the question on reforms to tackle the corruption problems, Melia stated that like in many other countries there is an anti-corruption legislation in Azerbaijan, including the National Action Plan on fighting the corruption, and there have been steps taken on local levels to eliminate corruption. As an example, he cited the activity of ASAN service centers which had positive impact among the ordinary public and local administrations.

While Cardin asked the witnesses to present their views on the constructive relationship between Azerbaijan and Israel, Rubin said the Azerbaijan-Israel relations not only benefitted both countries economically but also ensured stability in the greater region. Rubin further reiterated the position of the U.S. government on deep appreciation to Azerbaijan for not only facilitating shipments through southern route of NDN, but also putting Azerbaijani peacekeeping troops on the ground, as well as committing to remain in Afghanistan after 2014, when the U.S. troops are expected to pull out.

Shaffer spoke of the religious tolerance in Azerbaijan as one of the key important attributes of the country. Touching upon the importance of Azerbaijan as an energy supplier, Shaffer said it was the country providing a new alternative source of gas, and not re-routing existing sources of natural gas to Eastern Europe, and while the initial volumes of gas are small and address the needs of the countries mostly in need of alternative sources, the volumes and sources may grow.

The event was attended by staffers of officers of legislators, government officials and constituents.

The Working Group of the U.S. Congress on Azerbaijan which has operated since 2004, plays a special role in the development of relations between Azerbaijan and the United States. For more information, please visit the Alliance website at www.azerbaijanamericaalliance.org

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