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CONGRESS CONTINUES FOCUS ON GLOBAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

Award-winning actress and UNIFEM Goodwill Ambassador Nicole Kidman, and U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Melanne Verbeke, are scheduled to testify Wednesday on violence against women and girls around the world before a key House Subcommittee. They will be joined on the witness panel by Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), Breakthrough Founder and Executive Director Mallika Dutt and Former U.S. Representative and Shared Hope International President and Founder Linda Smith.

"It is time to examine what the Congress, the Obama Administration and the United Nations can do to stem this growing tide of violence," House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights and Oversight Chairman Bill Delahunt (D-MA) said in scheduling the hearing.

Senate Addresses Global Violence

This is the second congressional hearing in a month on the issue. On October 1, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee held its first-ever hearing on global violence against women and girls. Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPF) President Esta Soler testified, releasing new public opinion research that finds that the majority of voters (61 percent) say addressing global violence should be one of the top priorities for the United States government. One in four voters says it should be the top priority.

"We need to offer the same protections that women in the United States receive to women around the world," Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-MA) said in opening the hearing. "That's why I plan to re-introduce the *International Violence Against Women Act*." First introduced last year by then-Senator Joseph Biden and Senator Richard Lugar (R-IN), this bipartisan legislation would make stopping violence against women and girls a priority in American diplomacy and foreign aid for the first time.

The public opinion research Soler released was conducted by Lake Research Partners for the FVPF and Women Thrive Worldwide. It finds that, across demographic and party lines, voters

strongly support the *International Violence Against Women Act (I-VAWA)*. Eight in ten voters (82 percent) express support for the bill, and six in ten (62 percent) express intense support. Seventy-two percent support *I-VAWA* even after being told it could cost as much as \$200 million per year. This legislation maintains strong support from voters, even when compared to other foreign policy priorities like promoting democracy and trade, fighting corruption abroad, and reconstructing Iraq and Afghanistan.

“Much of the support here in Congress to address violence against women emanates from high-profile emergencies like the crises in Darfur and the Democratic Republic of Congo,” Soler said at the hearing. “It’s a commendable impulse to respond to emergencies, but violence against women and girls is an emergency every day. We need a response that is sustained and durable enough to address not just today’s emergencies, but those that lie ahead. We need this Congress to pass – and fund – the *International Violence Against Women Act*.”

Officials Testify

“The momentum is building for us to be able to make a clear and concrete difference in the lives of women and girls who are affected by gender-based violence or who are at risk of violence,” Ambassador Verveer said at that hearing. “The President, Vice President and Secretary of State are committed to incorporating women’s issues into all aspects of our foreign policy.”

Ambassador Stephen Rapp testified for the first time as Ambassador-at-Large for War Crimes Issues. He emphasized the importance of holding accountable those responsible for perpetrating rape and other forms of violence against women during conflicts. “While trials alone cannot end widespread violence, they can play an important part in re-establishing the rule of law in an environment of insecurity and impunity,” he testified. “As part of a comprehensive strategy, prosecuting those who commit acts of violence against women and girls in conflict-related situations can help restore the stability that is necessary for individuals, families, communities, and nations to develop and prosper.”

After Ambassador Verveer and Ambassador Rapp testified, Senator Kerry said, “We can do this. We can have an impact on harmful behaviors and create change. The issue of violence against women and girls is a perfect example of how the United States needs to lead, by maintaining the moral high ground. We can maintain our leadership and lead on these issues.”

Senator Kaufman (D-DE) added that ending violence against women and girls, “is the core of our country’s DNA.”

Senator Lugar was unable to attend the hearing, but issued a statement that said, in part, “One of the biggest obstacles hampering development throughout the world is violence against women... During the last Congress, I joined with then-Senator Biden in introducing the *International Violence Against Women Act*... We envisioned that [*I-VAWA*] would monitor and oversee all U.S. programs and aid abroad that deal with women’s issues, including gender-based violence. As the United States seeks to improve its efforts to combat international violence against women, we should have a much better understanding of the scope of U.S. resources that are currently being applied to the problem.”

Powerful Testimony

The other witnesses at the Senate hearing were: former military advisor to the UN Secretary-General and former UN Force Commander for the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo Major General Patrick Cammaert; International Crisis Group (ICG) Deputy President and Former Ambassador to Angola Donald Steinberg; and International Center for Research on Women (ICRW) President Geeta Rao Gupta.

Using “sexual violence as a weapon of war creates instability and fosters terror: it must be addressed as a serious element of foreign policy and conflict intervention,” Major General Cammaert told the Committee.

Senator Barbara Boxer (D-CA) concurred, calling global violence against women and girls, “a national security issue.”

Steinberg focused his testimony on promoting women’s participation in the peacekeeping process. “We all recognize that, when social order breaks down, it is women and girls who suffer most. But how we make peace is equally important in determining whether the end of armed conflict means a safer world for women or simply a different and in some cases more pernicious era of violence against them.”

Gupta addressed the economic impact of violence against women and girls, emphasizing the need for an integrated and comprehensive approach that includes economic empowerment. “With your help, women and girls can be the catalyst for the next great development innovation,

the drivers of economic recovery, and the leaders of a more peaceful and just world,” she told the Committee.

I-VAWA would: support international violence prevention and health programs as well as services for survivors; encourage legal accountability; promote access to economic opportunity and education; and better address violence against women in humanitarian situations.

The United Nations Development Fund for Women estimates that one of every three women globally will be beaten, raped, or otherwise abused during her lifetime. A 2005 World Health Organization study found that of 15 sites in ten countries – representing diverse cultural settings – the proportion of ever-partnered women who had experienced physical or sexual intimate partner violence in their lifetime ranged from 15 percent in Japan to 71 percent in Ethiopia.

Lake Research Partners conducted the research to explore voters’ attitudes about violence against women and girls globally on behalf of the FVPF and Women Thrive Worldwide. The nationwide telephone survey of 1,200 registered voters was conducted from July 14 - 21, 2009. Its margin of error is +/- 3.1%.

More information on the new public opinion research is available at
http://endabuse.org/userfiles/file/GlobalPrevention/Lake_Intl_Research_Key_Findings_Memo_9-09.pdf.

To read Esta Soler’s complete written testimony, visit
http://endabuse.org/userfiles/file/PublicPolicy/SFRC_ES_Testimony_on_Global_VAW_10-09_FINAL.pdf.

For more information on the Senate hearing, visit
<http://foreign.senate.gov/hearings/2009/hrg091001p.html>.
