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ONE HUNDRED NINTH CONGRESS

CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES  
COMMITTEE ON INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS  
HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
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His Excellency Vojislav Kostunica  
Prime Minister of Serbia and Montenegro  
Office of the Prime Minister  
Belgrade, Serbia

Dear Mr. Prime Minister:

I am deeply troubled to learn of the outrageous grenade attack against József Kasza, President of the Vojvodina Alliance of Hungarians. Your statements condemning this crime were particularly welcome. I am concerned, however, about efforts to investigate this crime. Only a full, complete, and independent investigation into this criminal act can bring the perpetrators to justice, credibly establish that the government is taking action in this matter, and thereby prevent further ethnic violence.

This brutal attack on a leader of the Hungarian community in Vojvodina represents a new and dangerous escalation of the ethnic tensions in the area. In my view it results from a lack of respect for ethnic minorities and is a consequence of severe infringements of minority rights. During my recent trip to Subotica (Szabadka), I heard about abuses of legal powers by authorities which fuel those tensions.

- In June of this year, the Subotica and Novi Sad prosecutor offices threatened to imprison. József Kasza, as well as Zoltán Bunyik, the Vice President of the Vojvodina Alliance of Hungarians, in addition to other Hungarian leaders. That threat appeared based upon no fact or circumstance that would justify such action.
- I was deeply disturbed to learn of the recent arrests of two ethnic Hungarians: Gabriella Ágoston and Gábor Nemes. Ms. Ágoston, a well-known attorney who has defended victims of violence against minorities, has been in police custody now for over four months. Local authorities incarcerated her on April 26 and have repeatedly extended her detention without sufficient legal cause. Ms. Ágoston is also suffering from serious medical problems, but was denied vital medical care. In connection with Ms. Ágoston's arrest, Mr. Gábor Nemes was also detained and still remains in prison. These arrests undermine international and local confidence in the legal process and the justice system.

BY MAIL AND FAX

These developments appear to be part of a disturbing pattern of intolerance and violence against Vojvodina's minorities. It appears to reflect little or no improvement since my July 9, 2004, letter to you dealing with similar concerns. For some two years now, your government has failed to take effective action to suppress harassment and physical violence against non-Serbs, the intimidation of ethnic Hungarians, the harassment of individuals who have advocated greater autonomy in Vojvodina, the desecration of cemeteries, the appearance of anti-Hungarian, Croatian and Semitic graffiti in public places, and the vandalism of historic symbols.

I am disappointed that you have not established the two commissions you pledged to create in your statement on July 13, 2004, one to fully investigate the series anti-minority incidents that had taken place at that time and another to establish a course of action to prevent future violence. I am aware of the existence of the Hungarian National Council as part of the National Minorities Council, and the Serbian-Hungarian Bilateral Commission, but these two organizations have a more general mandate and do not focus on the problems that you were attempting to address a year ago.

As you are no doubt aware, earlier this year the European Parliament also expressed its views about the nature of these incidents in a report on Vojvodina and recommended six specific measures for the Serbian government to implement to deal with this serious problem. These recommendations include the reform of the police, security forces and the judiciary to ensure impartiality, and the vigorous investigation and prosecution of hate crimes.

Mr. Prime Minister, because of the recent incidents that have taken place which I outlined above, I strongly urge you to use your influence to facilitate the immediate release of Gabriella Ágoston and Gábor Nemes and to insure that prosecutorial and judicial abuse in these and similar cases are thoroughly investigated and corrected. All peaceful ethnic minority organizations and their respective leaders must be guaranteed the ability to function in a safe and secure environment in order to serve the legitimate interests of their communities.

I also urge you to undertake efforts to reverse cuts affecting Hungarian-language programming on Novi Sad Radio and Television, commence restitution of minority religious and community properties, as well as facilitate the opening of the Hungarian Teachers' University in Subotica as approved by Vojvodina's Hungarian National Council.

Mr. Prime Minister, I urge you immediately to undertake serious steps to implement of the rule of law and the protection of minority rights according to international legal standards. Only full recognition of those rights can bring an end to ethnic violence and tensions.

Sincerely,



TOM LANTOS  
Ranking Democratic Member