

Washington, D.C. - U.S. Rep. David Price (NC-04) addressed his colleagues late last night regarding H.R. 4681, a bill that would cut off aid to non-governmental organizations working for peace in the Palestinian Territories. Price believes the U.S. government is justified in withholding aid to the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority, given that organization's history of terrorism. However, the North Carolina Democrat argued that the bill being considered in the House would punish ordinary Palestinians indiscriminately and greatly undermine the efforts by our government and the Israeli government to broker peace in the Middle East. Price's floor speech follows:

Mr. Speaker, almost exactly a year ago, I joined a bipartisan group of Members in visiting the Hope Flowers School in the Palestinian village of al Khader, just outside of Bethlehem on the West Bank.

Hope Flowers teaches its students a curriculum promoting tolerance, nonviolence, democracy and peaceful coexistence. Our bipartisanship delegation witnessed the signing of a USAID agreement to renovate several classrooms and other key facilities at the school.

Projects like this are supported by the United States throughout the Palestinian territories. Other projects are paying for modern school books to ensure that fundamentalist propaganda has no place in Palestinian schools; potable water projects to prevent the spread of disease, economic development to improve job prospects for Palestinian youth, and construction of hospitals, schools, sewers, power grids and business centers.

These types of projects are critical to our interests, to Israel, and to the prospects for peace. They help prevent humanitarian crises and diminish popular discontent, and they also inculcate values like those taught at Hope Flowers.

They train peacemakers; they improve America's standing in the Middle East. Why would we want to eliminate programs like these? Are they not needed now more than ever? And yet that is exactly what H.R. 4681 would do. It would cut off U.S. assistance to the West Bank and Gaza.

Mr. Speaker, I stress, despite the way some proponents are trying to frame this debate tonight, the issue is not aid to Hamas or to the Hamas-controlled Palestinian Authority. Nobody on this floor tonight has any tolerance for Hamas.

The issue is rather the bill's ban on aid to all nongovernmental groups, private groups and organizations, many of whom are diametrically opposed to Hamas's philosophy.

Let me clarify some further misconceptions about this legislation. I am not speculating here, Mr. Speaker; I am referring to page 12 of the bill. I invite colleagues to read it.

Mr. Speaker, some have suggested the bill contains sufficient exceptions to allow humanitarian assistance to pass through. Not so. The bill makes an exception for health-related humanitarian aid, such as food, water and medicine. But it makes no provision for other forms of humanitarian assistance, such as aid for the homeless or displaced families and orphans.

Mr. Speaker, some have pointed to Presidential waiver authority in the bill and suggested that it would allow critical assistance to reach Palestinians. Not so. Unfortunately, all aid beyond health-related humanitarian assistance would be prohibited unless the President, on a case-by-case basis, were to certify that assistance is required by U.S. national security.

And then he would have to consult with Congress 25 days in advance and submit a written memorandum explaining why such assistance benefits U.S. security. How many projects would survive such a gauntlet?

Think about the kinds of aid programs that would be cut off, projects that focus on building democratic institutions and civil society, projects that promote economic development to stabilize the territories, projects that ensure that school curricula provide students with a progressive education rather than fundamentalist propaganda, curricula that teach tolerance and conflict resolution skills. Surely programs like this are in our interest.

Mr. Speaker, they are exactly what we need to reduce violence, to build the capacity of Palestinian civil society, and make progress toward a peaceful resolution; and yet they are

exactly the programs that would be eliminated in this bill.

Mr. Speaker, there are other problems with the bill as well. It would significantly handicap any effort to engage the moderate elements in the Palestinian Authority, such as Palestinian Authority President Abbas, by opposing restrictions on visas, travel, and official Palestinian Authority representation in the U.S.

Mr. Speaker, because of these fundamental flaws in the legislation, it is opposed by several leading voices for Israel and Middle East peace, including the Israel Policy Forum, Brit Tzedek, Americans for Peace Now, Churches for Middle East Peace – a broad coalition of churches – and the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

The Bush administration also opposes this bill. In a paper delivered to the House International Relations Committee, the State Department calls the bill "unnecessary" and says it "unduly constrains the Executive's flexibility."

Mr. Speaker, there is no denying that Hamas's election victory was a significant step backward in the quest for a peaceful resolution to this conflict. There is no disagreement here tonight that we should send Hamas a strong message that the world will not tolerate its violent and irresponsible behavior.

But this bill goes far beyond sending that message. Instead, it sends the message that the U.S. wants to punish the Palestinian people for Hamas's action, a message that serves no good purpose.

We can unanimously support – and that is what we should be doing tonight, my colleagues – we can unanimously support legislation blocking assistance to Hamas, and to a Hamas-controlled Palestinian Authority.

But if we adopt legislation that punishes the Palestinian people, instead of isolating the terrorists, we lose the moral high ground. Let us reclaim the moral high ground, signal our resolute opposition to terrorism and also our support for those Palestinian individuals and

groups who are working for a peaceful and democratic future.

Mr. Speaker, we should defeat this bill and ask the International Relations Committee to bring back a bill truly reflective of American interests and values.

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