

THE MOSCOW HELSINKI GROUP

Mr. CAMPBELL. Mr. President, May 12th marks the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of one of the most significant human rights groups of the 20th century, the Moscow Group to Monitor Implementation of the Helsinki Final Act.

On August 1, 1975, the United States, Canada, and thirty-three nations of Europe, including the Soviet Union, signed the Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the Helsinki Final Act. Among the agreement's provisions was a section devoted to respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms.

The Soviet government viewing the document as a great foreign policy victory published the text, in its entirety, in "Pravda," the Communist Party's widely circulated newspaper. That move proved to be decisive for the cause of human rights in the Soviet Union. A small group of human rights activists in Moscow, led by Professor Yuri Orlov, read the Helsinki Accords carefully and decided to take their government at its word.

On May 12, 1976, at a press conference initiated by Dr. Andrei Sakharov, the group announced the creation of the "Moscow Group for Assistance in Implementation of Helsinki Agreements," soon to be known simply as the Moscow Helsinki Group.

Needless to say, the Soviet authorities were not pleased that a group of private citizens would publicize their government's deplorable human rights record. The KGB swept down on the Moscow Helsinki Group and made its work almost impossible. Members were imprisoned, sent to "internal exile," expelled from the country, slandered as foreign agents, and harassed.

Despite considerable hardship and risks, members of the group persisted and their work served to inspire others to speak out in defense of human rights. Soon similar groups sprang up elsewhere in the Soviet Union dedicated to seeking implementation of the Helsinki Final Act. By 1982, the three remaining members at liberty in Moscow were forced to suspect their public activities.

Eventually, domestic and international pressure began to bear fruit and helped usher in dramatic changes under Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. Political prisoners and prisoners of conscience began to be freed and longstanding human rights cases were resolved.

In 1989, the Moscow Helsinki Group was reestablished by former political prisoners and human rights activists. In 1996, President Boris Yeltsin signed a decree formally recognizing the contribution of the Moscow Helsinki Group in the campaign to promote respect for human rights in Russia.

Mr. President, ten years after the fall of the Soviet Union, the Moscow Helsinki Group continues to promote human rights and fundamental freedoms in the Russian Federation. Work-

ing with a network of human rights centers throughout the country, the Moscow Group provides a wide range of assistance to Russian citizens and residents seeking information about human rights.

As Chairman of the Commission on Security and Cooperation, I congratulate the Moscow Helsinki Group on its 25th anniversary and wish its members the best in their continued endeavors.

Thank you, Mr. President. I yield the floor.

FREEDOM RIDERS

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, today, after the Senate finishes its business for the week, many of us will be returning to our home states. I will be flying to my home state of Illinois. And I can anticipate that the trip, for the most part, will be without incident.

However, this wasn't the case for African Americans 40 years ago. Forty years ago, desegregation laws in bus and train stations, as well as their waiting rooms and restaurants, prohibited African Americans from enjoying the same facilities as their white counterparts. The Supreme Court issued a ruling calling for the desegregation of interstate travel. However, this had to be tested.

The Congress of Racial Equality selected a group of students to make a two week trip through the South in nonviolent protest of racial desegregation laws. Congressman JOHN LEWIS was one of those students who was later joined by Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. These civil rights activists became known as the Freedom Riders. But unlike the travel we are all used to, their ride was filled with fear and brutality. Prior to embarking on this historic journey, the students were told to make out their last will and testament, just in case. But like most youths, they thought themselves invincible. They had no idea how truly dangerous and bloody their mission would become.

One white rider, Jim Zwerg, who joined the riders because he could no longer stand the injustice, had three of his vertebrae cracked, all of his teeth fractured, his nose broken, and suffered from a concussion. The Klan thought that he and other white Riders were betraying them.

On Mother's Day in Alabama, the young Freedom Riders were greeted by a mob of 200 with stones, baseball bats, lead pipes and chains. One Freedom Rider bus had its tires slashed and was stopped by an angry mob. An incendiary device was thrown inside the bus causing it to fill with smoke. And the angry mob held the door closed so that the Riders would burn inside.

The Riders were saved when the fuel tank exploded causing the mob to back away from the bus and allowing the Riders to escape before the bus was completely engulfed.

The Freedom Riders never made it to their destination of New Orleans. But

they achieved their objective. Attorney General Robert Kennedy ordered that the Supreme Court ruling finding segregation in interstate bus and rail travel unconstitutional be enforced.

The Freedom Riders became an inspiration to thousands of Americans to join the cause of tearing down racial inequality. It was a critical moment in the civil rights movement. About 300 protesters had joined the crusade, including our colleague Senator LIEBERMAN. This weekend marks that historic day 40 years ago.

I want to recognize and pay tribute to my colleagues and original Freedom Rider Representative JOHN LEWIS, as well as Senator JOE LIEBERMAN, who also took an active role in the South in the early 1960s volunteering to register African Americans to vote.

But even after 40 years, our nation still confronts racial problems everyday. In cities all across America, we can plainly see evidence of inequality, and injustice.

I am concerned that African Americans represent 12 percent of the U.S. population (some sources reflect 13 percent) and 13 percent of its drug users. Yet African Americans comprise 35 percent of all those arrested for drug possession and 55 percent of those convicted of drug possession. Five times as many whites use drugs as African Americans, but African Americans comprise the greatest majority of drug offenders sent to prison. Race appears to be a clear factor.

Yet, I also believe, there is still hope. I believe that justice can, and will prevail, if we are all diligent in pursuing the goals of peace and respect for each other that the brave men and women of the Freedom Riders set forth for the nation to follow back in 1961.

I am hopeful because we know that our system of criminal justice works. It may not be perfect, but it always strives to do right.

On September 15, 1963, a violent bomb went off in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, blasting the silent tranquility of that Sunday morning. That devastation also claimed the lives of four young African American girls, Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley, who were preparing for a church youth service that day.

Almost 40 years after this brutal hate crime was committed, justice finally prevailed last week when a Birmingham jury convicted Thomas Blanton of plotting the church bombing. During the closing argument, United States Attorney Doug Jones said, "It's never too late for the truth to be told. It's never too late for wounds to heal. It's never too late for a man to be held accountable for his crimes."

That's right. It is never too late to pursue justice in the face of injustice. And it is never too late to thank the Freedom Riders and all the other civil rights activists of the 1960s for their courage in standing up for justice.