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One Hundred and Thirteenth Congress
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission

Statement of Rep. James P. McGovern
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing
“The Global Gender-Based Violence Threat”
2175 Rayburn HOB – Wednesday, November 20, 2013 – 2:30 AM – 4:30 PM

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for being here for this important hearing on global gender-based violence. I want to thank J.P. Shuster and the staff of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for organizing today’s hearing. I also want to thank the International Rescue Committee for working with the Commission to organize this morning’s excellent photo exhibit in the Rayburn Foyer. Some of these photos are set up around today’s hearing room. These images are not only a powerful call to action, but they remind us of the extraordinary resilience of women and girls and their capacity to be powerful agents of change and peace in our societies. Finally, I want to thank our witnesses, especially those who travelled from Haiti and India to be with us today.

Monday, November 25th, is the United Nations’ International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Over the past two decades, the international community has increasingly recognized gender-based violence, often called GBV, as a significant human rights and global health issue. GBV has many forms. It includes both random acts of violence, as well as sustained abuse over time. It can include forced sex, physical violence and psychological abuse. Some abuses are embedded in culture or tradition, such as so-called “honor killings” or female genital mutilation. The trafficking of women and girls for labor and sex is an especially pervasive form of GBV worldwide. And it

is important to note that GBV affects not only women but also sexual attacks against men and boys.

The U.S. is hardly exempt from gender-based violence and violence against women. According to the National Task Force to End Sexual and Domestic Violence Against Women, nearly one in five women and one in 71 men have been raped in their lifetime. One in four women and one in seven men have experienced severe physical violence by an intimate partner. Hundreds of thousands of American children each year are at risk of commercial sexual exploitation. Decades of investment in passing laws, supporting victims of violence, training advocates, lawyers, police, judges, teachers, doctors, nurses and the public are finally beginning to change how victims of physical, psychological and sexual violence are viewed by their communities and by medical, law enforcement and legal professionals. And we still have a long way to go.

In recent years, the U.S. and international community have increasingly confronted the problem of GBV in emergency situations, such as violent conflict, war and natural disasters. In such cases, vulnerable populations face an array of threats, including GBV, and often their governments, communities, and families fail to protect them. Refugees and the internally displaced, and those attempting to return home, can remain vulnerable for years in the wake of emergencies. Already, we are receiving reports of women and girls vulnerable to violence in the aftermath of the typhoon that just devastated the Philippines.

The U.S. has made it a high priority to address GBV, especially in two of its egregious forms – trafficking in persons and female genital cutting. In August 2012, President Obama issued an executive order to launch a multi-year U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence Globally. This initiative builds on the U.S. National Action Plan on Peace and Security and other existing State Department and USAID policies on gender equality and women's empowerment.

But the challenges to preventing GBV and providing adequate services to victims remain vast and complex. In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, for example, both systematic and opportunistic GBV continues to occur with extreme brutality. Adding to the challenge of addressing such attacks is concern that the DRC military has been the largest perpetrator of abuses. In October last year, the Commission heard from women's rights activists from Afghanistan, where legal protections for women remain limited, despite improvements since the fall of the Taliban in 2001. They voiced extreme concern – concerns that I share – about the vulnerability of women and the loss of hard-earned gains for the rights of women and girls as the U.S. withdraws the majority of its forces and the struggle over political power excludes the voices of Afghan women.

Like many around the world, I was shocked and horrified by news of the ruthless gang-rape and murder of a 23-year-old physiotherapy intern in New Delhi, India last December. Although that case received international attention, most GBV crimes in India are never reported, and many victims believe the legal system does not adequately protect them. In Haiti, incidents of GBV increased amid the insecurity, displacement, and lack of social services following the January 2010 earthquake. In addition, hundreds of thousands of children in Haiti have been trafficked for domestic slavery. Girls make up the majority of these children, who are known as *restaveks* [Res-tah-VEKS], and they are extremely vulnerable to sexual, physical, and psychological abuse in the households they serve.

We know that violence against women is also weapon of war. In Colombia, unspeakable acts of violence have been commonplace against the women of that country, carried out by all the armed actors. The violence continues even after women and children are displaced or seek to rebuild their lives. Colombian women – like their counterparts around the world – are often

leaders in their local communities and neighborhoods, and therefore targets of threats and violence. But they are not just victims – they are leaders of change and reconciliation. This Friday, November 22nd, thousands of Colombian women will gather in Bogota to march in support of peace, an end to violence, justice and reconciliation. I hope I speak for all of us here in this room when I say that we stand with these brave women as they unite for peace and an end to violence and conflict in Colombia.

I would now like to turn to our witnesses for today's hearing. Along with their oral testimony, I would like to submit into the Record any written testimony provided by our witnesses. I would also like to submit the following statements for the Record:

- The Statement of Esta Soler, President and Founder, Futures Without Violence
- The Statement of Ms. Wang Chunying
- The Statement of Ms. Ma Chunmei [**chun-my**]

With that, I would like to welcome our first witness, Ms. Catherine Russell, the U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues.

Ambassador Russell, welcome.