



## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

### **Parliamentarians at Risk Around the World**

**Thursday, September 19, 2019**

**10:30 – 11:30 a.m.**

**H-313 Capitol Building**

#### **As prepared for delivery**

Good morning and welcome to our briefing this morning on *Parliamentarians at Risk Around the World*.

This briefing is co-hosted by the bipartisan House Democracy Partnership. I want to thank my colleague David Price and say how much we appreciate HDP's collaboration.

I also want to thank the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the IPU, and its Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians who made it possible for our distinguished panelists, including two members of parliament, to join us today.

A third MP, Delsa Solórzano of Venezuela, was unable to travel at the last minute, and so she has sent us a recorded statement.

As members of Congress, the topic we are here to discuss today should concern all of us.

In 2018 the IPU Committee on the Human Rights of Parliamentarians examined 564 cases of violations of the rights of MPs from 43 countries.

The most common violations included undue suspensions and loss of parliamentary mandate; lack of fair trials or other unfair proceedings; violation of freedom of expression; and torture, ill-treatment and other acts of violence against MPs.

80% of the cases targeted opposition politicians.

I worry that we hear these kinds of statistics and think it's a far-away problem in other countries, and it's not really about the U.S.

But that's not true.

I think of my colleague, Congresswoman Gabby Giffords, who was shot, along with 17 others, on January 8, 2011, outside a supermarket in Tucson where she was meeting with constituents. Six of the victims died, including a 9-year-old girl. Gabby recovered but had to retire from the House.

I think of Congressman Steve Scalise, who came way too close to dying after he was shot during a practice baseball game on June 14, 2017, in an attack that the Virginia Attorney General concluded was "fueled by rage against Republican legislators" and "an act of terrorism."

I am deeply grateful that cases like this are few and far between.

But the risks are real.

My colleague Ilhan Omar, a member of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission, has received so many death threats that Speaker Pelosi felt compelled to request increased protection for her, her family and her staff.

Just yesterday, the President tweeted a video falsely claiming she was dancing on the anniversary of September 11th, leading directly to additional hate speech and death threats.

Other women colleagues of mine in this House have been vilified on-line in ways that are deeply sexist, demeaning, play to ugly stereotypes and, I fear, could easily incite violence.

So, the problem of threats and attacks against parliamentarians is a global problem; it is an American problem; and it is a problem that attacks the institutions that lie at the very heart of our democracies – namely, the legislatures.

The first branch of government created by the United States Constitution is the legislative branch. It is Article I. In our system of government, Congress is the first among equals.

In principle, in all democracies, the congress or parliament or national assembly is the institution that is closest to the people. It's no accident that opposition MPs are so often attacked – they're the ones voicing dissent and challenging abuses of power by presidents and prime ministers.

Without parliaments, democracy ceases to exist.

Without members of parliaments, parliaments cease to exist.

In this chamber we are constantly busy – but we need to do a better job of standing in solidarity with our fellow and sister legislators everywhere in the world. We need to understand that any attack on them is an attack on us, too.

This is why I am so happy to be here today to hear from parliamentarians who have been the victims of efforts to silence their voices, but who continue to stand up and speak out. I look forward to hearing their recommendations for ways our Congress can do more – both to support individual parliamentarians who come under attack, and to change an environment that rewards threats and vitriol over facts, analysis and reasoned debate.

Thank you.