Mr. Speaker, as co-chair of the

Congressional Human Rights Caucus I continue

to be concerned that Russia has significant

problems in honoring the universal

human rights standards that are widely accepted

in many parts of the world. Russia aspires

to be a leading force on the world economic

and political scene, but it is failing to respect

some of the fundamental and universal

principles of the rule of law, human rights and

freedom of speech and expression.

I am concerned about freedom of expression

in Russia, given the fact that the Russian

government’s commitment to independent and

free media, freedom of assembly, and religious

freedom appear to be wavering. In fact,

Russia’s last major non-state television station

was eliminated in 2003 as a result of government

pressure. This is a disturbing trend

which is in stark contrast to the value placed

on freedom of speech by other democracies

around the world.

Earlier this year the State Department released

its annual Country Reports on Human

Rights Practices, which included documentation

of many abuses. Serious violations of

basic human rights in Chechnya were highlighted

including unlawful killings, abuse of civilians

and Chechen fighters and politically

motivated disappearances. The report also

mentioned that the December 7, 2003, Duma

elections failed to meet international standards.

Factors undermining party competition

included criminal charges and threats of arrest

or actual arrest against major financial supporters

of opposition parties and the seizure of

party materials from opposition parties.

I remain concerned that Russia is named in

the State Department’s annual report on trafficking

in persons as a tier two country and

this year was placed on the tier two ‘‘special

watch list.’’ Trafficking in persons is an evil

that must be directly confronted and ended.

Countries that fall under the special watch list

have high numbers of trafficking victims and

fail to provide evidence of increasing efforts to

combat severe forms of trafficking from the

previous year. Russia is named as the largest

source country in Europe for trafficking and is

a significantly large transit country. It is my

hope that the Russian government will acknowledge

the extent of its trafficking problem

and play a more active role in ending trafficking

in the region.

I also am concerned that Russia still does

not fully accept or encourage religious freedom.

The 2004 annual report on religious freedom

by the United States Commission on

International Religious Freedom states about

Russia:

‘‘A federal law on religious organizations enacted

in 1997 contains provisions that have

prevented some religious groups from registering

and thus practicing freely. Regional

governments have often passed ordinances

that result in discrimination against minority religious

groups, and acts of violence against

members of religious minorities are widespread.

‘‘In the past few years, however, trends

have emerged that have raised serious questions

about Russia’s commitment to democratic

reform and protection of religious freedom.

Russian authorities have denied registration

efforts of certain religious communities,

based on the allegedly insufficient time they

have existed, despite a February 2002 Russian

Constitutional Court decision that found

that an active religious organization registered

before the 1997 law could not be deprived of

its legal status for failing to re-register. The

government has meddled in the internal affairs

of religious communities, including the Jewish

and orthodox Old Believer communities.’’

The U.S. Congress must speak out about

human rights abuses around the world. It is

my hope that Russia will begin to encourage

religious freedom, crack down on trafficking in

persons and comply with international standards

on human rights.

I would like to submit for the RECORD an article

from The Wall Street Journal, highlighting

the concern for the lack of rule of law in Russia.