

Washington DC, 5/17/07—On Wednesday, Congressman Steve Israel (D-NY) and Congresswoman Barbara Lee (D-CA) announced the House passage of a Darfur-related amendment they authored for the Fiscal Year 2008 National Defense Authorization Bill. The amendment is intended to send a message to Sudan's President Omar Hassan Ahmed al-Bashir that the United States is interested in expanding a nearby airfield in Chad for genocide relief missions, NATO operations and a possible U.N. deployment to the region.

“We need to send a clear and unequivocal message to the government of Sudan that we will proactively explore every option and bear the burdens necessary to help stop the genocide in Darfur,” explained Congressman Israel. “400,000 innocent people have been murdered in Darfur, there are two million refugees, and through it all, the government of Sudan tests the will and the patience of the United States, the United Nations and the entire world. This amendment says that we have the will and we are running out of patience. One hundred miles from Darfur in Chad is the Abeche air base; if diplomacy fails, if Sudan continues to defy the world and perpetuate this genocide, that air base could be used for potential NATO operations, UN peacekeeping forces and humanitarian missions. It says to Sudan that we will not turn our backs, we will not close our eyes—we will be prepared.”

“Genocide is happening on our watch,” said Congresswoman Lee. “We have a responsibility to explore every opportunity and use every tool at our disposal to end the violence and provide humanitarian assistance to help the people of Darfur.”

The Abeche airfield, located near the Darfur region of Sudan, is currently used for military transportation and humanitarian operations but may need upgrades to the air strip and hangers to allow for increased air traffic.

The Israel-Lee amendment requires that the Secretary of Defense submit a report to Congress on the current operational status of the airfield located in Abeche, Chad and provide recommendations for upgrades to the airfield to support enhanced operation and a large increase in air traffic. It also includes a Sense of Congress that the United States, in cooperation with the Government of Chad, should help provide for the necessary upgrades to the airfield in Abeche in order to support potential North Atlantic Treaty Organization operations, facilitate a possible United Nations deployment to Chad and the Darfur region of Sudan and to provide support for humanitarian operations.

The bipartisan amendment was passed unanimously with the support of the Chairman and Ranking Member of the House Armed Services Committee. It also has the support of the Save Darfur Coalition, the Genocide Intervention Network, the ENOUGH Project, Americans for Informed Democracy, the Truman National Security Project and Citizens for Global Solutions.

Sudan has been ravaged by civil war for four decades. More than two million people have died in Southern Sudan over the past two decades due to war-related causes and famine and millions have been displaced from their homes. In Chad some 375,000 people have sought shelter from armed conflict, of which almost a quarter of a million are refugees from neighboring Darfur.