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Congressman Pledges To Use His Position On
Appropriations Committee To Restore Proposed Cuts

Washington, DC - Congressman Steve Rothman (D-NJ9) today met on Capitol Hill with Armenian Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian during a briefing for members of the Congressional Caucus on Armenian Issues. As a member of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, which allocates the United States' foreign aid, including funds directed toward Armenia, Rothman told Oskanian that he would fight President Bush's proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2004, which includes a drastic cut in foreign assistance to Armenia.

"I was pleased to have the opportunity to speak with Foreign Minister Vartan Oskanian regarding issues of critical importance to Armenia," said Rothman, who himself is a member of the Congressional Caucus on Armenian Issues. "As Armenia takes great strides toward democracy and free market reforms, I believe that the United States must continue to provide Armenia with significantly more assistance than President Bush has proposed."

Of all of the former Soviet republics, Armenia sustained the largest percentage decrease in U.S. assistance as outlined in the Bush Administration proposed budget for Fiscal Year 2004. The Administration calls for \$52 million in economic and military assistance, a decrease of \$21 million from the Fiscal Year 2003 proposal of \$73 million. While the Fiscal Year 2003 budget has yet to receive final approval, Rothman has worked aggressively to push the proposed figure as high as \$94 million.

Bush Administration officials have said the drastic cut in funding was due to the United States needing to direct more resources to front-line states in the war on terrorism. The officials noted that because of this shift in priorities, and due to the success of various programs in Armenia, the decision was made to reduce foreign assistance to Armenia. However, Foreign Minister Oskanian noted that there is still much work to be done in Armenia with the help of U.S. foreign assistance. He argued that helping Armenia should also remain a United States priority.

"The challenge for Armenia is to sustain the growth that it has exhibited in the past few years so that the Armenian people will begin to reap the benefits. U.S. assistance is still vitally necessary to continue this growth," said Rothman, adding that this is particularly true given the ongoing blockade by Azerbaijan. "It appears that we have been successful in getting more aid for Armenia than President Bush proposed for Fiscal Year 2003, and I am hopeful that we will be able to fight the Administration's cuts for 2004 and once again provide significantly more aid for Armenia." Foreign Minister Oskanian also briefed Members on Armenia's position regarding any possible conflict with Iraq, and assured the Members that Armenia would assist the United States however it could. The Nagorno Karabakh issue was also discussed, and Foreign Minister Oskanian told Members that progress most likely will not be made until after the upcoming elections in Armenia and Azerbaijan.

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