

from the office of

*Senator Edward M. Kennedy
of Massachusetts*

STATEMENT OF SENATOR EDWARD M. KENNEDY
ON THE PLIGHT OF THE KURDS
CONGRESSIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS CAUCUS

October 24, 1989

Let me first commend the Congressional Human Rights Caucus and especially Congressmen Tom Lantos and John Porter for hosting this important briefing on the plight of the Kurdish people. For too long, Congress has ignored this tragedy and today's briefing is an important first step in raising the consciousness of Congress and the American people about the crisis of the Kurds.

We are honored today by the presence of a tireless champion of the rights of the Kurdish people, Mrs. Danielle Mitterrand. Her persistence, commitment and dedication to preserving the Kurdish culture have greatly advanced this oft-forgotten goal. Friends of justice everywhere owe her a deep debt of gratitude and thanks for her efforts.

Mrs. Mitterrand has travelled to Iraqi Kurdish camps in Turkey and seen first hand the hardships of these innocent victims of persecution. She established a human rights foundation in Paris, the French Liberty Foundation, which has joined in the struggle of the Kurds and, together with the Kurdish Institute of Paris, she organized the first international conference ever devoted to the tragic history of the Kurds.

Last weekend's conference is a long-overdue recognition by the international community of the need for urgent protection of one of the proudest and oldest cultures. Attended by Kurds from 23 countries and distinguished guests from around the world, the conference was an important international recognition of one of the most flagrant examples of man's inhumanity to man. It brought home to all of us the need to take immediate steps to bring an end to the ongoing campaigns of persecution of these people.

Let us never forget that, even today, Iraq continues to destroy Kurdish villages, Turkey continues to prohibit Kurds from speaking their native language and Iran continues its war against the Kurds. Earlier

this year, the Iraqi government began a massive campaign for the forcible relocation of tens of thousands of Kurds in northern Iraq to other parts of the country. Last year, thousands of Kurds died from the poison gas attacks by Iraq and thousands more had to flee to Turkey, Iran and Syria.

The brutal Iraqi campaign to eradicate the Kurdish culture must be universally condemned by the civilized world. The use of chemical weapons against Kurdish villages last year was one of the most brutal and horrendous actions of modern times. Credible reports detailing the attack by Iraqi warplanes talk of the air smelling like bad garlic, of thousands of "frozen" bodies, of birds falling out of the sky, and of livestock dropping dead. Some villages reported Iraqi troops opening fire with machine guns on the survivors and bulldozing bodies into mass graves. 65,000 Kurds fled Turkey immediately following that attack. Their stories are bone chilling.

We may never know the extent of that tragedy but we must act now to ensure it never, never happens again.

Helsinki Watch summed up the plight of the Kurds as a "staggering list of human rights abuses: arrests, torture, murder, assassination, chemical warfare, mass deportations, expulsions, appalling conditions in refugee camps, refusal of political asylum by the West, denial of ethnic rights to language, literature and music, and destruction of villages, towns and cities."

The international community and the civilized world can no longer remain silent on the issue of the persecuted Kurdish people. Far too often throughout history, the Kurds have been treated as pawns in regional conflicts, their people have been persecuted and their culture repressed. The time to stop this crime against humanity has come.

The Kurdish conference last weekend in Paris proposed many worthwhile initiatives which I hope will be reviewed and implemented. I urge my colleagues, in particular, to follow the suggestion of the Soviet human rights activist, Andrei Sakharov, and press U.N. Secretary General Javier Perez de Cuellar to organize a special General Assembly session on the Kurds. I also hope that the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees will use his power and influence to ease the plight of these people. And the United States Government must take a leadership role in prohibiting the use of deadly chemical weapons -- and in ensuring that anyone who dares use them suffers severe consequences from the international community.

For too long, powerful governments and individuals have persecuted this priceless culture with impunity. We must rededicate ourselves to combatting this tragedy and preserving the Kurdish way of life. Mrs. Mitterrand, I commend you for your leadership in this important struggle and believe you have brought us closer to the goals we all share. Together, we will triumph and ensure that the Kurds and their culture receive justice and honor they deserve.