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Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-0923

Statement of the Honorable Alcee L. Hastings
Judiciary Democrats Forum

Protecting a "Suspect" Community: Racial Profiling & Hate Crimes
March 28, 2012

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Mr. Chairman, thank you for holding this extremely important forum today.

Over a month has passed since 17 year-old Trayvon Martin was fatally shot and we have yet to see justice served. George Zimmerman shot and killed Trayvon, who was walking unarmed near a relative's home in Sanford, Florida. Zimmerman has not been arrested or charged in this crime due to his claim of self-defense, which grants him immunity under Florida's misguided 'Stand Your Ground Law,' passed in 2005.

Regardless of whether or not Trayvon's shooting is itself a hate crime, the fact that we even need to have this discussion today indicates that our country has a long way to go before we win the fight against violent acts of racism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, and all other types of hatred. There are a lot of questions surrounding the death of Trayvon Martin for which we demand answers.

I have always maintained that with Florida's 'Stand Your Ground' law it would only be a matter of time until someone would open fire on an individual innocently walking behind them, just because they look different than them. My greatest fear has become reality with the inexcusable killing of this young man. I said then, and I say it again now, that this law is a license to kill. It is an unconscionable perversion of the notion of self-defense, enabling people to commit outright murder and then throw up their hands afterwards to claim they felt 'threatened.' Florida must abolish the 'Stand Your Ground' law.

I am pleased that the Department of Justice (DOJ) is now investigating the case, but it should not have taken almost a month, and it should not have required the media to shine the spotlight on such an egregious offense for the authorities to act. I hope that along with the DOJ's investigation, the dangers of our gun laws that allow all sorts of people to have concealed weapons will finally be addressed so that such a tragedy can never occur again.

Mr. Chairman, we must, as a nation in a time of mourning and reflection, take the steps necessary to eradicate hate crimes from our national dialogue once and for all. We must make sure that the circumstances surrounding this boy's death in Sanford is never, ever repeated elsewhere. We are supposedly a civilized country, yet tragedies like this leave our streets resembling a showdown at the OK Corral. But this is not the Wild West. Let Trayvon's death not be for naught. Let us honor his life by righting this wrong, and seeing that justice is served for Trayvon and his family. Let us, together, transform our country into a place where hate crimes are no longer even an afterthought.