

It is therefore disheartening that the Maoists continue to engage in tactics that serve little purpose but to make the lives of the Nepali people, already difficult, even harder. They have just staged their latest general strike, which for the past 3 days crippled Nepal's economy.

For 3 days, Nepal, already a poor country, neither imported nor exported goods through its land entry points, causing a significant loss of revenue. Tourism, one of Nepal's most important sources of income for hotels, shops, transport, restaurants, and guide services, has been damaged. The garment industry, also among Nepal's largest, was brought to a halt. And there is the risk that foreign companies will decide that Nepal is still too unstable, and look elsewhere to invest.

What possible good does this kind of protest do? It angers and hurts the very people whose interests the Maoists claim to serve. In fact, it hurts poor people the most, because they and their children do not have savings, and go hungry. And it can hardly make other political parties more likely to accede to the Maoists' demands.

The latest news is that the Maoist leaders have threatened an indefinite national strike unless the government puts in place within a month a unity government headed by the Maoists. This kind of ultimatum, which has no place in a democracy, would be disturbing enough if it were not for the fact that the Maoists headed a coalition government last year after winning national elections, only to leave the government in May when it failed to replace the then army chief of staff.

I also felt that Nepal needed a new army chief who was not tainted by past abuses, but for the Maoists to quit the government and then accuse the President of forcing them to do so when their demands were not met, was irresponsible. Today, in fact, Nepal has a new army chief. Time will tell if he is the right person for the job.

As an observer of developments in Nepal, I have been encouraged by the positive steps the country has taken since the events that led to the end of the monarchy. But the desires that led to that courageous demonstration of popular will remain unfulfilled. The institutions of democracy are barely functioning and the political situation continues to deteriorate. Only 5 months remain until the deadline for drafting a new constitution, and growing distrust between the political parties threatens to derail the peace process. Indeed, the political parties have often seemed more concerned with promoting their own interests than with addressing the needs of the Nepali people. The army has yet to reform. Thousands of Maoist ex-combatants need to be demobilized and trained for jobs in the civilian workplace. Unless the political parties take decisive steps to work together to address these issues, the situation will go from bad to worse, and at some point the Nepali people

may again take matters into their own hands.

In the meantime, the periodic economic shutdowns and acts of violence and intimidation perpetrated by the Young Communist League, cause one to question whether the Maoist leaders understand or accept the responsibilities that are inherent in a democracy. Rather than orchestrating acts of collective punishment to try to force a result, the Maoists need to earn the public's trust and respect. There is also the responsibility to exercise power in a manner that strengthens, not erodes, popular support. So far, the Maoists have failed to demonstrate a capacity for either.

The Communist Party of Nepal—Maoist—today remains a designated foreign terrorist organization under U.S. law. I am among those who would like to see that designation lifted, as I believe the U.S. could, through technical assistance and exchange programs, help the Maoist leaders to better understand the benefits of working constructively within the democratic process on behalf of the Nepali people. But the fact remains that having engaged in acts that got them onto the list in the first place, they need to demonstrate that they have abandoned those tactics and are accountable to the people. Organizing harmful strikes that serve no logical or legitimate purpose, encouraging acts of violence, refusing to punish its own members who committed atrocities, and making threats, are not consistent with a responsible political organization.

Mr. President, poverty and injustice have been a fact of life in Nepal for centuries. Three and a half years ago the Nepali people rose up against a corrupt, abusive monarchy and demanded something better. They are still waiting, but they will not wait forever. Like Nepal's other political parties, the Maoists will be judged by what they deliver.

FATE OF HMONG REFUGEES

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, I want to speak briefly about a worrisome humanitarian situation that is developing in Thailand, which could cause problems for our relations with the Thai military.

Thailand and the United States are longtime friends and allies, and our Armed Forces have developed a cooperative relationship. Many Thai military officers have been trained in the United States, and Thai soldiers have participated in joint U.S.-Thai training exercises such as Operation Cobra Gold. I expect this relationship to continue. But I am very concerned, as I know are other Senators, that the Thai Government may be on the verge of deporting roughly 4,000 ethnic Hmong back to Laos where many fear persecution.

Thailand has a long history of generosity towards refugees from Burma, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. It is a history to be proud of. But the Thai

Government, which insists that the Hmong are economic migrants who should be repatriated, has reportedly deployed additional troops to Phetchabun province where most of the Hmong are in camps. There is a growing concern that the Thai military may expel the Hmong before the end of the year. There is also concern that a group of 158 Hmong in Nongkhai province, who have been screened and granted United Nations refugee status, could be sent back to Laos. I understand that the United States and several countries have told the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and the Thai Government they are prepared to consider this group of refugees for resettlement. Potential resettlement countries should be given an opportunity to interview these individuals in Thailand.

It may be that some of the 4,000 Hmong are economic migrants. It is also likely that some are refugees who have a credible fear of persecution if they were returned to Laos. I am aware that many Hmong fought alongside the U.S. military during the Vietnam war. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, working with Thai authorities, needs to determine who has a legitimate claim for asylum and who does not, in accordance with long-standing principles of refugee law and practice. No one with a valid claim should be returned to Laos except on a voluntary basis. The United States, and other countries, can help resettle those who do have valid claims but need access and the opportunity to consider relevant cases.

I mention this because I cannot overstate the consternation it would cause here if the Thai Government were to forcibly return the Hmong to Laos in violation of international practice and requirements. The image of Laotian refugees including many who the United Nations and the Thai Government itself have stated are in need of protection being rounded up by Thai soldiers and sent back against their will during the Christmas season, and the possible violence that could result, is very worrisome. On December 17 I joined other Senators in a letter to the Thai Prime Minister about this, and I will ask that a copy be printed in the RECORD at the end of my remarks.

As chairman of the Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs Subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee which funds international assistance programs, I have supported U.S. military training programs and other assistance to the Thai military. We share common interests and want to continue to work together. But after the deplorable forced repatriation to China of Uighur refugees by Cambodian authorities last week, we expect better of the Thai Government. Should the Hmong be treated similarly it could badly damage the Thai military's reputation, and put our military collaboration at risk.

Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent to have printed in the RECORD the

December 17, 2009 letter to which I referred.

There being no objection, the material was ordered to be printed in the RECORD, as follows:

U.S. SENATE,

Washington, DC, December 17, 2009.

Mr. ABHISIT VEJJAJIVA,
Prime Minister, Kingdom of Thailand, Wisconsin Ave, N.W., Washington, DC.

DEAR MR. PRIME MINISTER, We are writing to express our concern regarding reports of a possible repatriation to Laos of Lao Hmong from the Huay Nam Khao camp and Nong Khai detention center in Thailand. While we recognize that the Kingdom of Thailand is burdened by the large number of refugees it hosts on its territory, we encourage you to not take steps to repatriate any individuals to Laos at this time. Thailand is a strong ally of the U.S., and the cooperation between our governments, including a history of working together on Laotian and Burmese refugee issues, is greatly valued.

We understand that your government has conducted screenings in the Phetchabun camp in fluay Nam Khao to identify and separate refugees meriting protection from those migrating for primarily economic reasons. We remain concerned, however, regarding the lack of transparency in this screening process, and the absence of a civilian entity to lead it. In July of this year, a group of Senators sent a letter to General Songkitti Jaggabatarata requesting more information about the criteria and methods used in screening Laotian Hmong in the Phetchabun camp, but a response to this inquiry has not yet been received.

We acknowledge the difficulty that this issue has posed for both your country as well as the inhabitants of the camps. However, we believe that the lack of transparency in the screening and repatriation process only exacerbates these difficulties and heightens international concern regarding these populations. A process that adheres to the core tenets of the refugee convention, and is conducted by an independent third party organization, could resolve much of this concern by helping to ensure that the Lao Hmong are able to provide a full and accurate account that can serve as the basis for an appropriate status determination.

Before repatriating any individuals to Laos, we strongly urge your government to work with an independent third-party organization to conduct a transparent screening process consistent with international standards. Once such a process is in place, we hope that any Hmong determined to have refugee status will be provided opportunities for third country resettlement. This includes the individuals at the Nong Khai center, who have already been screened by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. For those who are not judged to require protection, we encourage you to work with international organizations and the governments of the U.S. and Laos to establish a repatriation process that includes effective third party monitoring.

We also understand that Assistant Secretary of State Eric Schwartz will be visiting Thailand in the very near future. We hope that the U.S. and Thailand can work closely to find a solution that alleviates the burden of this situation on Thailand, as well as the concerns about the repatriation of those in need of protection, and we would be happy to consult with you on this process.

We appreciate your efforts to ensure a transparent process and just resolution to this issue. The Kingdom of Thailand remains a close ally of the United States and we look

forward to working with your government to strengthen this important relationship.

Sincerely,

Russell D. Feingold, United States Senator; Barbara Boxer, United States Senator; Sheldon Whitehouse, United States Senator; Richard G. Lugar, United States Senator; Patrick J. Leahy, United States Senator; Lisa Murkowski, United States Senator; Amy Klobuchar, United States Senator; Mark Begich, United States Senator; Al Franken, United States Senator.

TRIBUTE TO LEWIS K. BILLINGS

Mr. HATCH. Mr. President, today I express my deep appreciation to a great Utahn and friend, Provo City Mayor Lewis K. Billings, whose tenure as mayor will soon come to an end. It has been my distinct pleasure to work with Mayor Billings over the past 12 years.

Nestled at the base of the Rocky Mountains, Provo was founded by rugged pioneers in 1849 and is one of the oldest cities in the West. Today, Provo is one of largest cities in the State of Utah. Mayor Billings and his beautiful wife Patti are longtime residents of Provo and raised eight wonderful children there.

Mayor Billings was elected Provo City Mayor in November 1997, after completing 3 years as chief administrative officer and director of community and government relations for the city of Provo. He and I share many of the same conservative values and principles and his service as mayor is a strong reflection of his dedication to those ideals. Mayor Billings will long be remembered for focusing on effective public safety and law enforcement, fiscal responsibility, economic development and job creation, neighborhood and downtown revitalization, the arts, emergency readiness, and a host of other local, regional, and national public policy issues. During his tenure, Provo City has consistently received national recognition for low crime rates, high quality of life, and positive business development.

Mayor Billings has accomplished a great deal during his tenure as Mayor of Provo. His dedicated public service and determination to shape Provo into the wonderful city it is today will be remembered for years to come. I ask my colleagues to join me and the citizens of the great State of Utah in thanking Mayor Billings for his many years of dedicated service. We all appreciate his efforts and service, but none so more than me.

GUN OWNERS SUPPORT GUN SAFETY LAWS

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, the debate surrounding gun legislation is often an acrimonious one, creating the perception that Americans are hopelessly divided on this policy issue. After listening to the positions of the National Rifle Association, NRA, a person could

conclude that progress toward a national consensus on sensible gun legislation is a long way off. This perception, however, is just that: merely a perception. In reality, Americans of all political stripes share much common ground when it comes to issues of gun safety, and I am hopeful that this consensus will produce tangible legislative results.

In a recent poll conducted by well-known pollster Frank Luntz, NRA members and non-NRA gun owners expressed strong support for a number of proposed gun safety laws. These gun-owning Americans did not see a contradiction between supporting legislative efforts to reduce gun violence and their right to bear arms. Specifically, 85 percent of non-NRA gun owners and 69 percent of NRA gun owners supported closing the "gun show loophole" by requiring all gun sellers at gun shows to conduct a Brady criminal background check on prospective purchasers. In addition, 86 percent of non-NRA gun owners and 82 percent of NRA members favored a proposal to prevent individuals listed on a terrorist watch list from purchasing firearms. Seventy-four percent of non-NRA gun owners and 69 percent of NRA members also agreed with this statement: "the federal government should not restrict the police's ability to access, use, and share data that helps them enforce federal, state, and local gun laws."

At first glance, these polling numbers may not seem very surprising. After all, these gun safety proposals are founded on common sense and are crafted to keep firearms out of the hands of criminals and terrorists. Unfortunately though, the NRA leadership continues to oppose three Federal gun safety bills that, according to the recent poll, their own members support: the Gun Show Background Check Act, S. 843, which would close the "gun show loophole;" the Denying Firearms and Explosives to Dangerous Terrorists Act, S. 1317, which would prevent individuals listed on terrorist watch lists from purchasing a gun; and the Preserving Records of Terrorist and Criminal Transactions Act, S. 2820, which would improve the ability of law enforcement agencies to prevent gun violence by increasing the amount of time gun background check records are kept.

I support these sensible gun safety measures, and as the polling indicates, so do a majority of American gun owners, including NRA members. The NRA is not only out of touch with mainstream America, they also are out of touch with their own members. It is time to set aside the false claims that too often cloud the debate surrounding gun safety. There is an overwhelming consensus in America: the time to pass commonsense gun safety legislation is now.