people with disabilities. It is impossible to feed a starving population on the ground with food donations when, as I have mentioned earlier, a significant number of people in the developing world have a disability, and cannot even reach this food aid. International Donor countries could have hardly intended to provide food aid so we all can witness scenes on television reminiscent of Darwin's ''Survival of the Fittest,'' where only the strong survive. The same is true for any economic development. If significant numbers of people are excluded from any development and opportunities in a country, we can expect their dependence on international aid to continue. Furthermore, how can persons who are deaf or blind ever benefit from significant efforts in the global fight against HIV/AIDS, if they cannot be part of any education campaign, an issue recently addressed in a New York Times article from Sunday, March 28th? The United States can hardly change the infrastructure of a country over night. Nor can we do it alone, we need the international community and encourage all nations to move forward with our guidance and support.

Critics also miss the point of what the purpose of the proposed Convention really is. The most important role of the proposed convention is the elevation of disability rights to the highest level of international law. Only if we can establish an internationally verifiable consensus on what disability rights are and through what mechanisms they can be achieved, can we expect to make them part of a meaningful international dialogue. This is exactly the purpose of other UN human rights instruments the US has not only entered into, but helped bring into existence, most notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which has become part of customary international law. This convention most certainly is not a ''silver bullet'' for all disability rights problems everywhere, nor does it change the situation in a country over night, only because it has become a party to this treaty. It also does not serve to ''threaten'' developing countries with the overnight implementation of unachievable goals and standards, but to offer an opportunity for a country to commit itself to a verifiable journey toward standards, which are the result of an international agreement. I think it behooves the United States to let other countries benefit from our expertise and the standards we have achieved, most notably in the Americans with Disabilities Act. We are undoubtedly the leading nation on disability rights, and we are the sole remaining superpower. This unique position realistically means that we can either provide active leadership toward passage of such a document, ensuring that it gains international credibility, or we can stand aside. Therefore, I was disappointed by the remarks of former Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights, Ralph Boyd, before the Ad Hoc Committee on June 18, 2003. In his remarks, Assistant Attorney General Boyd, recognized that ''Unfortunately, persons with disabilities have too often been the targets of improper discrimination . . .'' and continues that: ''. . . the activism and attention of UN Member States brings hope that one day they will be seamlessly integrated into the societies in which they live.'' Interestingly enough, the U.S. does not seem to be one of those states infected with ''activism and attention,'' as he points out that—while the US has a lot of experience, and other countries are more than welcome to learn from us—we do so considering our ''comprehensive domestic laws protecting those with disabilities, not with the expectation that we will become party to any resulting legal instrument.''

We have invited the Department of Justice to participate in today's briefing, but the Department declined our invitation yesterday. I find it very curious that the Department of Justice speaks at the United Nations about these issues, but has nobody available to share their position with Members of Congress at this briefing today.

I, and all of my colleagues on the International Relations Committee, strongly disagreed with the position expressed by former Assistant Attorney General Boyd when we passed unanimously H. Con. Res. 169, a bill I have introduced in strong support of a UN Convention. I seriously hope that the Administration is reconsidering its position, and I call on the House Leadership to schedule my legislation as soon as possible, so that the Full House and the Senate can go on record in calling for an international convention before the next working group meeting in May. We also need to bring the complete resources of the U.S. Government to help in addressing the problems of people with disabilities abroad. That is why Frank Wolf and I introduced H.R. 1462, the International Disabilities and Victims of Civil Strife and Warfare Assistance Act, and we hope to see legislative action on that initiative soon.

We should be the engine of this effort, not the breaks.

Apart from our moral obligations as the richest and most powerful nation on this planet, the United States also stands to benefit directly from such efforts. First, only equal and full participation of all groups of society in all aspects of life can guarantee a stable country, and a strong democracy. I do not need to discuss this in great detail, as the spread of democracy around the globe has long been the foremost foreign policy goal of the United States. A leadership role in the field of international disability rights will significantly impact the positive perception of the United States globally. Second, in an increasingly global economy, American companies have to be global actors to be competitive. Maybe the critics of a strong US leadership role on this issue can explain to us how American citizens with disabilities will participate in those global opportunities, and the career chances they present, if persons with disabilities would not even be able to get to a branch office of their company in El Salvador, Rwanda, Vietnam or—let's say, Uzbekistan?

As you are aware, the US government recently made fundamental changes in the way we will consider foreign aid. The Millennium Challenge Act of 2003 (Pub. L. 108–199) established the Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), and clearly proscribes in Sec. 607(b)(1)(B) as one criteria for a country's eligibility for funds through the Millennium Challenge Account the '' respect [for] human and civil rights, including the rights of people with disabilities.'' According to our legislation, ''Such determination shall be based, to the maximum extent possible, upon objective and quantifiable indicators of a country's demonstrated commitment to the criteria in subsection (b), and shall, where appropriate, take into account and assess the role of women and girls.''

The legislative intent is clear, the implementation is not. According to the MCC's Report on the Criteria and Methodology for Determining the Eligibility of Candidate Countries for Millennium Challenge Account Assistance in FY 2004, the disability rights criteria will largely be determined by the findings of the State Department's Human Rights Report. Unfortunately, the Country Reports vary widely in comprehensiveness and quality on this issue, precisely because of the absence of recognized international standards, which we have for other human rights issues. Clearly, only global and enforceable disability rights standards which have become part of accepted international law by UN Member Countries through a UN Convention can provide us with appropriate reporting criteria, so that an objective determination can be made.

A GOOD WEEK FOR FEDERAL EMPLOYEES

HON. CHRIS VAN HOLLEN

OF MARYLAND

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Friday, April 2, 2004

Mr. VAN HOLLEN. Mr. Speaker, this week, two important pieces of legislation that will help Federal employees advanced in the House of Representatives. House Resolution 581, which expresses Congress's support for parity between military and civilian Federal employee pay raises, passed the House 2 days ago with strong bipartisan support. Yesterday, H.R. 3751, which requires the Administration to present options for expanding the Federal Employees Health Benefit Plan (FEHBP) to include greater access to dental, vision and hearing benefits, received a unanimous vote in the Government Reform Committee.

Congressional efforts to correct pay disparities have been frustrated by the budgetary priorities of the Bush Administration, which has for years shown that pay parity is not a priority. Indeed, the administration's 2005 budget includes a 3.5 percent pay increase for military personnel, but only a 1.5 percent increase for civilian employees. The strong bipartisan support for pay parity in the House, even in the face of presidential opposition, illustrates the commitment many members of Congress feel for ensuring that we acknowledge the service and sacrifice made by both military and civilian personnel.

This week's Government Reform Committee vote in support of H.R. 3751 is also an important step forward for federal employees. Dental and vision problems can often be as disruptive to the lives of federal employees and their families as other health concerns. Yet vision and dental needs are not covered by many federal benefit plans. Serious, developing dental and vision problems are not often obvious to the casual observer and can sometimes only be detected by a physician. Despite its potential impact on general health, dental and vision insurance, in most cases, must currently be assumed by the federal employee alone at great personal expense. H.R. 3751 requires the Office of Personnel Management to explore ways to make affordable vision, hearing and dental care available to all federal employees.

Federal employee jobs, services and benefits have been the subject of much congressional activity lately. At every turn, the Bush Administration has fought efforts to protect the rights of federal employees and opposed the principle of pay parity in annual compensation. Fortunately, thanks to the success of these two bills, there is good news for federal employees this week.