

Iraq, it is nearly impossible to ignore the fact that thousands of Iraqis who not long ago were living as refugees in a foreign country now feel safe enough to come home. This reversal of refugee trends clearly indicates that there are good things happening in Iraq and around Baghdad.

The AP reports that “In a dramatic turnaround, more than 3,000 Iraqi families driven out of their Baghdad neighborhoods have returned to their homes in the past three months as sectarian violence has dropped.” The article goes on to quote one refugee who returned home to his neighborhood of Khadra. “In Khadra,” he said, “about 15 families have returned from Syria.” He said, “I’ve called friends and family still there and told them it’s safe to come home.”

Where there was once widespread fear among Iraqi citizens, we are now seeing something new—hope, hope for a better and safer future. Nothing confirms this more than the return of refugees and their testimony that it is becoming safer in Iraq. While not yet safe, no one is saying the job has been completed, but surely an honest, objective appraisal would acknowledge the improvements in the security situation as demonstrated not only by these statistics but by testimonials from Iraqis themselves.

These heartwarming accounts of families reuniting in neighborhoods, which not long ago had been written off as hopeless, and businesses opening their doors are important lessons for us all. The strategy employed by General Petraeus has worked and is continuing to work. The efforts of our military men and women who have put their hearts and souls into this mission are now paying dividends and producing results.

These security gains are not a fluke. What we are seeing is a direct result of a carefully designed strategy which includes ramped-up counterinsurgency operations, increased efforts to foster cooperation and reconciliation among local tribes, and our continued backing of the hard work of the American military and support for their families.

As we are presented with funding requests by the Pentagon to bring about a stable and peaceful Iraq, we are ensuring that our soldiers have the resources they need to bring peace and stability to a tumultuous land. My hope is we will not use the funding request from the Pentagon for continued support for our troops as another political football, as it has been used in the past, particularly in the face of such hopeful and promising news for which I would expect we would be grateful and thank our men and women in uniform and their families who have sacrificed so much to help bring this about, along with our Iraqi allies.

General Petraeus told reporters this past weekend:

In general, we think that there are no al-Qaeda strongholds at this point.

While he was quick to remind us that they are still a potent threat, his as-

essment of the progress in Iraq can be nothing but reassuring. I shudder to think of what would have happened had we listened to the naysayers months ago who said we have to withdraw all our troops, even before the surge was fully implemented. So far, we have voted 59 times on Iraq-related resolutions, most of which are nonbinding sense-of-the-Senate resolutions; 59 times we have voted even before the surge had a chance to be implemented. Now we see what a mistake it is to bet against the men and women of the U.S. military. Thank goodness those resolutions were not successful, and thank goodness our American soldiers, sailors, marines, airmen, and Coast Guard were able to carry out this new plan under the leadership of General Petraeus. We now see at least some hope in a land where hope was in short supply.

Although many of my colleagues on the other side of the aisle prejudged the surge strategy and continue to oppose our efforts in Iraq, some of whom call even today for cutting off funds to support our troops, we see now substantial evidence of progress. It is my continued hope these positive developments may yet change the tone of the national dialog on the global war on terror, including the campaign in Iraq. It is time for all Members of this body to take an objective look not through a political lens, not through a lens which sees only the next general election, but to look objectively at what our troops are accomplishing in Iraq. Instead of focusing only on the challenges, we should at least be honest enough to acknowledge the accomplishments, not the least of which are the indisputable gains in security made through their sacrifices.

I, for one, am proud to applaud the undeniable achievements of our troops in Iraq. Their hard work and tireless dedication have reminded us that a stable and peaceful Iraq is within reach. It is my fervent hope that my colleagues will join me in acknowledging and honoring the successes achieved by our military personnel and renew their support for them, their commander, and the counterinsurgency strategy that is bearing fruit and to always remember their families at home who wait for their loved one to return as soon as our mission is accomplished.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Michigan.

GETTING RESULTS

Ms. STABENOW. Mr. President, I rise to respond to what has become a regular drumbeat in this Chamber in terms of the distinguished Republican leader and those on the other side of the aisle talking about how we have not accomplished anything this year, how the budget has not gotten done. It is important to continually remember what we have been dealing with as the new majority coming into the Senate

in January, laser focused on changing the direction and the priorities of the country, laser focused on getting things done for middle-class Americans who are counting on us, who feel squeezed on all sides and see prices increase on gasoline and health care and the cost of college, all those kinds of things that come down on Americans as they are working harder and harder every day, maybe facing the loss of a job or having lost a job, lower wages, and so on. Those are the folks we are fighting for every day and, I am proud to say, getting results.

It is important to realize what has been happening since January. Despite all of the lamenting on the other side of the aisle about not getting things done, what we have seen are 52 Republican filibusters so far this year—unprecedented, the number of times we have had to vote to stop a filibuster. By the end of this week, it will be 53 or 54. It will continue right on, as there are efforts politically to stop what we are doing to change the direction of this country and focus on those things middle-class Americans care about every day and want to see fixed. In spite of that, we are, in fact, getting things done.

One of the areas I am proudest of is our refocus in the budget on keeping our promises to veterans. We heard this morning that we need to pass a veterans budget. There is no question about it. There is no question about the fact that we not only need to, but we will. But we need to also remember that when we came in in January, last year’s budget wasn’t done yet. The previous majority didn’t get the budget done at all in 2006. When we came in and were left, frankly, with a budget mess, we made sure that in the process of keeping the Government going, public services going for the balance of the year, we addressed veterans first and foremost by placing dollars into what is called a continuing resolution because we know our veterans have not been getting the resources they need, brave men and women coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan every day who have not been able to get the health care they need, too many caught in unfortunate bureaucracies.

We heard about Walter Reed and those who are receiving military health care and then moving to the VA, and too many folks who are getting caught in that process and being hurt by the process. We have made veterans and keeping our promises to them and our military the highest priority. We addressed the issues that came up regarding Walter Reed and passed the Wounded Warrior provisions in the Department of Defense authorization that my senior colleague from Michigan, of whom we are so proud, Senator CARL LEVIN, helped lead. He led that, and we are making those changes.

In the budget—and I am proud to be a member of the Budget Committee, which has made sure this has happened

under our great leader from North Dakota, Senator CONRAD—we have said for the first time we are going to fund veterans services at the level the veterans organizations say we need. We are going to use the numbers they recommend. We have seen consistently under this administration an underfunding of those things which are needed by our veterans coming home, the top of which has been health care, mental health services, and rehabilitative services.

We, since January, have made veterans health care the top priority. I am proud of the fact that we have added dollars. We have addressed the system problems. We have looked at what we need to be doing for families, both of Active military as well as our veterans. We don't have any concern at all about standing up and saying that we have been putting our veterans first, despite filibuster after filibuster after filibuster. Anyone watching will see more this week. It seems to be the nature of things today. But we have increased the dollars, the resources, the commitment—keeping our promises to veterans. We have done that in the budget for next year. We have done that in the funding available now. It is part of our overall vision and commitment.

We are getting results for middle-class Americans. That is what we are all about, the folks who are sending their children, husbands, and wives to the war to fight for our country, coming home, expecting us to keep the promises the country has made as it relates to veterans. We take that extremely seriously. We are keeping those promises as part of our efforts to get results for the American people. We intend to do that in this budget we will pass, that will go to the President, that will be historic in that it is keeping the promises to our veterans that they expect us to keep.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. TESTER. Madam President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Ms. STABENOW). Without objection, it is so ordered.

FARM BILL

Mr. TESTER. Madam President, before I begin my speech today on the Wild Horse border crossing legislation, I want to say a couple things in reference to the farm bill, and I will be speaking on it, potentially, later today. But if what I have heard this morning here in morning business is correct, I ask the leadership on the other side of the aisle to bring that caucus together.

The farm bill is far too important to play politics. It is a critical issue dealing with this country's food security and dealing with this country's family

farmers. As I have said many times before, if we ever lose family farm agriculture in this country, this country will change for the worse—no ifs, ands, or buts about it. This farm bill is a good farm bill, passing out of committee, I believe, unanimously. It is a bill that deserves an honest debate by this body and deserves passage. It is critically important that this happen very soon, that we set our differences aside and work together to get this bill done.

WILD HORSE BORDER CROSSING

Mr. TESTER. With that, Madam President, I want to announce that yesterday I introduced a piece of legislation that will establish a 24-hour port of entry at the Port of Wild Horse, which is north of Havre, MT.

This legislation will establish this 24-hour port on the Montana-Alberta border. American trade with Alberta is growing at a rapid rate. Excluding pipeline shipments, Alberta's exports to the United States have grown 86 percent over the last decade. America's exports to Alberta have increased 75 percent. So it is a good deal in both directions.

The United States now sells more than \$12.5 billion worth of goods to Alberta, most of which moves by truck through just five border crossings—only one of which is open 24 hours a day.

Commerce between the United States and Alberta is expected to increase. The Canadian development of the Alberta oil sands region means the United States is sending more heavy machinery north of the border. That is traffic which must move by truck. But today, truck traffic from Texas and other main shippers of these products must go hundreds of miles out of the way to reach the oil sands region. According to one Canadian study, an additional \$4 billion worth of goods will be needed annually as the oil sands are developed in Alberta. This represents more than 40,000 truckloads of goods each year.

If all these trucks—as well as the 160,000 trucks that currently pass through our 24-hour port of Sweetgrass—were forced to move through the one existing 24-hour border crossing, the result would be an average of 480 trucks crossing it every day of each year. There is little doubt that such a pace would be both economically insufficient and unsustainable for our security needs. It would be faster and more economical for many of these products to move to the oil sands area through an eastern Alberta crossing, such as a crossing north of Havre at Wild Horse, and that is exactly what this legislation will do.

The State of Montana and the Provincial Government of Alberta have both passed resolutions calling for an upgrade to the border crossing at Wild Horse. Over the next few months, Senator BAUCUS and I will work with our

colleagues and with Customs and Border Protection to determine how best to accomplish this goal.

I understand that CBP faces numerous staffing challenges in order to meet this proposal. I have tried in my short time in the Senate to highlight and address these challenges. But the cost of ignoring economic growth in Alberta and the border crossing needs in that region would be harmful to Montana's economy and to our Nation's economy. For that reason, I am pleased to have offered this bill.

Madam President, I yield the floor and suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The clerk will call the roll.

The assistant legislative clerk proceeded to call the roll.

Mr. CONRAD. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the order for the quorum call be rescinded.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection, it is so ordered.

RELEASE OF AITZAZ AHSAN

Mr. CONRAD. Mr. President, I rise today to speak about a matter of great personal concern with respect to events in Pakistan.

On last Saturday, a Pakistani leader, Aitzaz Ahsan, was arrested while conducting a press conference in Islamabad. Aitzaz Ahsan is one of the most distinguished jurists in Pakistan. He is the chief counsel to the Chief Justice of the Pakistani Supreme Court. He is the head of the Pakistani Supreme Court Bar Association. He is a longtime leader, or was a longtime leader in Pakistani Parliament. He has represented people ranging across the political divide in Pakistan, from Prime Minister Bhutto to former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif. Sharif, although a political opponent, hired him to be his chief counsel.

Mr. President, this is a personal matter because Mr. Ahsan's son is a close friend of our family. I want to say further about Mr. Ahsan that he is pro-Western. He is prodemocracy. He was educated at Cambridge. His son is a close friend of our family, who went to Harvard University, graduated there, went to Yale Law School, graduated there, served in the very prestigious law firm of Cleary Gottlieb in New York, was then hired by Kofi Annan to be a speech writer for him at the United Nations, a post where he continues to serve.

I have, yesterday, written a letter to President Musharraf asking for the immediate release of Aitzaz Ahsan. Today, I am circulating a letter among colleagues asking them to sign the letter to President Musharraf, asking for intervention.

Mr. Ahsan is not the type of person who ought to be detained, arrested, threatened. That is not going to build respect for democratic institutions or for the future relationship of our countries.