

around the globe. We can step back and watch that happen, or we can show once again that the United States is going to lead by example.

Not very long ago we had that chance with Russia. But rather than look for ways to put past hostilities and distrust behind us and embark on a new relationship, we sought to take advantage in ways that exacerbated that distrust.

Today the relationship is a far cry from what it could and should be, and it will require significant investments in diplomacy to rebuild it.

We can lead in the world, we can build new alliances and work to solve conflicts, promote stability and develop new markets, or we can turn inward. That is the choice we face with this amendment. We are part of a global economy. We face grave challenges, from al-Qaida in Pakistan to drug cartels in Mexico. Climate change threatens the survival of species in ways that may profoundly affect our own survival not fifty million years from now, but within the lifetimes of our children and grandchildren.

This is no time to trifle with the need for American leadership. I thank all Senators for supporting this amendment.

Ms. SNOWE. Mr. President, I rise today in support of the passage of a truly bipartisan amendment to the budget resolution that Senator CARDIN and I are introducing. This vital amendment would address the Government Accountability Office's, GAO, recent recommendations to improve the Small Business Administration's, SBA, management and oversight of the Historically Underutilized Business Zone, HUBZone Program and ensure that only eligible firms participate in this crucial program.

As former chair and now ranking member of the Senate Committee on Small Business and Entrepreneurship, I have long championed critical small business programs such as the HUBZone Program, which provides Federal contracting assistance to small firms located in economically distressed areas, with the intent of stimulating economic development and job creation. According to the GAO, as of February 2008, 12,986 certified businesses have participated in the HUBZone Program, since its inception in 1997. And in fiscal year 2007 alone, over 4,200 HUBZone firms obtained approximately \$8.5 billion in Federal contracts. During these troubling financial times, the HUBZone Program is an essential tool in helping small businesses drive our national economic recovery.

Unfortunately, the GAO recently found in its three reports—Small Business Administration: Additional Actions Are Needed to Certify and Monitor HUBZone Businesses and Assess Program Results, GAO-08-643; HUBZone Program: SBA's Control Weaknesses Exposed the Government to Fraud and Abuse, GAO-08-964T; and HUBZone Program: SBA's Control

Weaknesses Exposed the Government to Fraud and Abuse, GAO-08-964T—that the mechanisms that the SBA uses to certify and monitor HUBZone firms provide limited assurance that only eligible firms participate in the program. The GAO report found that of 125 applications submitted in September of 2007, the SBA only requested supporting documentation, which helps to clarify the eligibility of the business, for 36 percent of the applications and only conducted a single site visit for all 125 applicants. While the SBA's policies and procedures require program examinations, the agency only conducts them on 5 percent of certified HUBZone firms each year. This is a glaring lack of oversight that must be rectified.

The amendment we introduce today would take immediate steps to correct the lack of effective administrative oversight by incorporating all recommendations that GAO provided for improving the HUBZone Program. This measure would require more routine and consistent supporting documentation during the program's application process. In its report, the GAO found that the SBA relies on Federal law to identify qualified HUBZone areas, but the map it uses to publicize HUBZone areas is inaccurate, and the economic characteristics of designated areas vary widely. Our amendment would require that the SBA take immediate steps to correct and update the map that the SBA uses to identify HUBZone areas and implement procedures to ensure that the map is accurately updated with the most recently available data on a more frequent basis.

The GAO also found that the mechanisms that the SBA uses to certify and monitor firms provide limited assurance that only eligible firms participate in the program. It reported that more than 4,600 firms that had been in the program for at least 3 years went unmonitored. This amendment would require the SBA to develop and implement guidance to more routinely and consistently obtain supporting documentation and conduct more frequent site visits, as appropriate, to ensure that firms applying for certification are indeed eligible. These common-sense, achievable steps would help to eliminate participant fraud and misrepresentation and ensure that firms applying for HUBZone certification are truly lawful and eligible businesses.

In its reports, the GAO illustrates the SBA lack of a formal policy on how quickly it needs to make a final determination on decertifying firms that may no longer be eligible for the HUBZone Program. According to the GAO, of the more than 3,600 firms proposed for decertification in fiscal years 2006 and 2007, more than 1,400 were not processed within 60 days—the SBA's targeted timeline. As a result of these weaknesses, there is an increased risk that ineligible firms have participated in the program and had opportunities to receive Federal contracts based on

their HUBZone certification. This failure in oversight hurts new and deserving firms in their quest to receive assistance through the HUBZone Program, which is the last thing we need during these challenging and perilous economic times. Our amendment would require the SBA to formalize and adhere to a specific timeframe for processing firms proposed for decertification in the future, as well as require further developed measures in assessing the effectiveness of the HUBZone Program.

Moreover, the Federal Government must strive to continue to provide additional contracting opportunities to those who are legitimate HUBZone firms. I am dismayed by the myriad ways that Government agencies have time and again egregiously failed to meet most of their small business contracting goals. I am alarmed that only one Federal small business contracting program—the Small Disadvantaged Business Program—has met its statutory goal and that the three other small business goaling programs have all fallen drastically short. For example, in fiscal year 2007, the HUBZone Program met only 2.2 percent of its 3 percent Government-wide goal. The Federal Government can and must provide more to our country's hard-working small businesses, and I am confident that this amendment will pave the way for more qualified firms to receive HUBZone assistance. In my home State of Maine, only 127 of 41,026 small businesses are qualified HUBZone businesses. HUBZones represent a tremendous tool for replacing lost jobs across all industry sectors in distressed geographic areas—clearly, this program should be better utilized.

MORNING BUSINESS

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the Senate proceed to a period of morning business with Senators permitted to speak for up to 10 minutes each.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

LAS VEGAS CONVENTION CENTER 50TH ANNIVERSARY

Mr. REID. Mr. President, 50 years ago—April 12, 1959—the Las Vegas Convention Center opened its doors for the first time. The first event at the new convention center was the World Congress of Flight's air and space show. Attracting 7,500 attendees, this was the first-ever international air show in American history, attracting the participation of 51 foreign nations. Originally 1.5 million square feet, the convention center has grown over the years to accommodate its popularity to a current size of 3 million square feet.

Today, the Las Vegas Convention Center is a major part of Nevada's culture and a force for job creation and economic growth. More than 46,000 jobs are directly related to the meetings

and conventions industry in southern Nevada. Aside from the jobs directly within the building, the Las Vegas Convention Center also contributes to the success of the dozens of small businesses that serve and supply the trade show industry. This includes florists, office supply stores, caterers and transportation services, just to name a few.

The Las Vegas Convention Center has contributed to Las Vegas growing into the No. 1 trade show destination in America. Clark County hosts more than 22,000 meetings, conventions, and trade shows every year. The convention center has also been home to many of our Nation's most historic product announcements—including the VCR, the DVD player and high-definition television.

By hosting concerts by the Beatles, heavyweight fights featuring Muhammed Ali, events with Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, Ford, Reagan and Bush, the Las Vegas Convention Center has for 50 years played a central role in the fabric of our national culture.

The Las Vegas Convention Center is an example of private industry and public agencies working collaboratively for the benefit of the community. I congratulate the Las Vegas Convention Center—and all those who make it a success—on 50 outstanding years of creating opportunity for the people of Nevada and capturing the imagination of people throughout America.

HELSINKI COMMISSION ACTIVITIES

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, I would like to report to my colleagues on the work of the U.S. delegation to the eighth Winter Meeting of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. This meeting was held on February 19 and 20 in Vienna, Austria. Prior to attending the Winter Meeting, the delegation traveled to Israel and Syria to ascertain the prospects for the Middle East peace process at this critical time.

I had the honor to lead this delegation as chairman of the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, better known as the Helsinki Commission.

Joining me as delegation leader in Vienna was my Helsinki Commission Cochair, Representative ALCEE L. HASTINGS. Three Senate colleagues on the Commission—Senator ROGER WICKER, Senator SHELDON WHITEHOUSE, and Senator TOM UDALL—also joined the delegation for the entire trip, as did fellow Commission member Representative MIKE MCINTYRE. Although not a member of the Helsinki Commission, Representative GWEN MOORE also joined the delegation.

The delegation first visited Israel. Our arrival came 3 days after that country's parliamentary elections and in the aftermath of the events in Gaza. We met with Israeli President Shimon Peres, Prime Minister Ehud Olmert,

Likud leader and now Prime Minister-designate Benjamin Netanyahu and numerous other officials. We also visited Yad Veshem and laid a wreath in memory of the millions lost in the Holocaust.

The delegation met with Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad in East Jerusalem and Palestinian Authority Chief Negotiator Sa'eb Erakat in the West Bank and in each of these meetings discussed the current situation in Gaza and the West Bank, the potential for reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas, and how the United States can be a constructive partner in facilitating the peace process.

In Damascus, Syria, our delegation had a country team briefing with U.S. Embassy staff, including U.S. Chargé d'Affaires to Syria, Maura Connelly. We also held a constructive meeting with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad and Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Al-Muallim, where the delegation pressed them on the need to improve human rights in Syria, encouraged them to assist the international community in bringing Iran into compliance with the International Atomic Energy Agency, and promoted restarting peace talks with Israel.

The delegation paid a courtesy visit to the historic Omayyad Mosque as well as visited the only surviving synagogue in Damascus. A briefing on the Iraqi refugee situation by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, Site Director in Damascus was extremely informative. The delegation was particularly moved by its meeting with a group of Iraqi refugees living in Syria. Their stories of hardship and suffering have galvanized our efforts to improve U.S. policies and activities in support of these refugees in Syria and in other surrounding countries.

The delegation's final stop was Vienna for the Winter Meeting. During the first day of the meeting, our delegation was joined by a delegation led by Representative JOHN TANNER that attended a meeting of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly in Brussels earlier in the week.

A meeting of the Standing Committee, composed of the officers and heads of delegation to the OSCE PA, took place prior to the formal opening. As an OSCE PA vice president, I reported on the latest efforts of the Obama administration to close Guantanamo Bay as a detention facility, an issue of continued concern in the Assembly. Our efforts in recent years to be responsive to criticism of U.S. performance have been well received and provide a stronger basis for us to raise concern about the human rights performance of other countries. In addition to detailing the specific policy changes already announced by the Obama administration, I expressed hope that "these measures will help restore faith in the United States as a friend, ally and leader in the global

community. If the United States wants to lead, we must lead by example."

Cochairman HASTINGS also made a presentation on his work as the Assembly's Special Representative on Mediterranean Affairs, in particular his travel to Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Israel—all Mediterranean Partner states—last December. He met with parliamentarians and senior government officials to discuss greater OSCE engagement, the Middle East peace process, regional economic cooperation, the prospects of the Union for the Mediterranean, and the Iraqi refugee crisis.

OSCE PA President Joao Soares, Portugal, opened the Winter Meeting before 250 parliamentarians. The opening plenary was addressed by Barbara Prammer, President of Austria's National Council; Greek Foreign Minister Dora Bakoyannis, who chairs the OSCE in 2009; French diplomat Marc Perrin de Brichambaut, the OSCE's Secretary General, and by Representative JOHN TANNER in his capacity as President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

Following the opening plenary, additional discussions were held in each of the Assembly's three General Committees: the First Committee, dealing with political affairs and security; the Second Committee, focusing on economic Affairs, science, technology and environment; and the Third Committee, which covers democracy, human rights and humanitarian questions. Rapporteurs and guest speakers discussed current issues and the prospects for OSCE PA work in the coming year. Among the OSCE officials speaking in committee were Knut Vollebaek of Norway, the High Commissioner on National Minorities; Goran Svilanovic of Serbia, Economic and Environmental Coordinator; Miklos Haraszti of Hungary, Representative of Free Media; and Janez Lenarcic of Slovenia, Director of the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights.

Every member of the U.S. delegation was active throughout the committee sessions. In the First Committee, Representative MCINTYRE reported on the delegation's visit to Israel and Syria, and Representative MOORE called attention to the plight of children in armed conflict and especially their use as child soldiers around the globe. In the Second Committee, Senator UDALL discussed the new prospects for U.S. engagement with Europe on climate change, and Senator WHITEHOUSE called for greater transparency regarding extractive industries, where corruption limits economic progress in developing countries. Senator WICKER responded to criticisms of the United States related to the economic crisis and pushed back against calls for greater trade protectionism. In the Third Committee, Senator WICKER stressed the continued need to focus on religious freedom, which is threatened in many countries of the OSCE region, while Cochairman HASTINGS explained the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly's