

comprehensive legislation “a game changer that will change the trajectory for millions of veterans for decades to come.”

As serious and as timely as they may be, unrelated issues such as Iran sanctions are just calculated attempts to dismantle our bipartisan effort to expand health care, education opportunities, employment, and benefits for our Nation's heroes. We can't allow our commitment to them to lapse or get caught up in separate issues of political grandstanding.

I thank the Senator from Vermont and all of his staff for their tireless work on this comprehensive legislation they have brought to the floor. I truly hope our colleagues will reconsider opposing this commonsense and important step to give those who have sacrificed everything the reproductive treatments they need to start a family.

I yield the floor.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. The Senator from Virginia.

Mr. KAINE. Mr. President, may I inquire how much time remains for the Democrats during morning business?

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Twelve minutes remain.

Mr. KAINE. I ask unanimous consent to use the remainder of the Democrats' time.

The ACTING PRESIDENT pro tempore. Without objection.

SYRIA

Mr. KAINE. Mr. President, I rise this morning to speak about the widening dimensions of the slaughter in Syria. A country of 23 million people, a proud country, is being transformed before our eyes into skeletons, refugees, and ghosts.

Three million Syrians have fled to neighboring countries. That number will likely exceed 4 million by the end of the year. Nearly 7 million Syrians are refugees within their own country, driven from their homes by the atrocities of the Assad regime. More than 130,000 innocent people have lost their lives during the 3-year civil war. We are witnessing one of the greatest humanitarian crises since World War II, and it can be stopped.

Last summer my Committee on Armed Services colleague Senator ANGUS KING of Maine and I visited Turkey and Jordan to explore the dimension of the refugee crisis in both of those nations. We visited refugee camps and talked to government leaders and NGOs about the damaged lives and the stressed communities that result from this unprecedented displacement of Syrians.

Last week the Senator from Maine and I visited Lebanon to see the scale of the Syrian crisis in that country. In a country of only slightly more than 4 million people, there are already over 1 million Syrian refugees who have fled into Lebanon over the last 3 years, one in four. Think of the scale of that refugee crisis. If we were to receive in the

United States war refugees at that scale, it would be 75 to 80 million people, nearly one in four.

In Lebanon last week we met with government leaders, NGOs, and the U.N. High Commissioner on Refugees. What we learned is staggering. The Lebanese people have been unbelievably resilient and welcoming, almost beyond the point of belief. The water and health infrastructure of that Nation is strained to the breaking point.

The Lebanese economy, already fragile, is teetering. Schools in Lebanon now operate on double shifts with Lebanese children in the morning and refugee children in the afternoon, accommodating tens of thousands of refugee children, with more coming every day.

The decision by the Lebanese terrorist militia Hezbollah to go all in to support the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad has led to a wave of extremist bombings against Hezbollah-connected sites and leaders within Lebanon in which many civilians are casualties. Senator KING and I witnessed a bombing in downtown Beirut while we were there, seeing it miles away. Many in our group saw the explosion, saw the smoke rise. We felt certain that our meetings would be canceled that day, but one of the most grim aspects of our trip is a bombing, a suicide bombing that killed 5 people and injured nearly 100, caused no one to change their daily routine. That is what life is in Lebanon largely because of the Syrian civil war.

The crisis extends beyond Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. Refugees are streaming into nearby Iraq by the thousands—30,000 in 1 day in August—exacerbating the deterioration of that country's stability and drawing it deeper into sectarian conflict.

This photo is on the Iraq border with Syria, and we see these refugees stretching into the distance in the hills beyond. This is what is happening with all of the neighboring countries to Syria.

The United States is the largest provider of assistance to the refugees who have fled outside of Syria. We have provided \$1.3 billion in aid thus far, \$340 million in Lebanon alone, but getting relief into Syria is the next challenge.

The conditions in Syria are even worse than the conditions I described in Lebanon. Nearly 7 million Syrians are displaced within their own country, more than 9 million Syrians need humanitarian aid, but they have not been able to receive basic humanitarian aid, food, and medicine due to the actions of the Bashar al-Assad regime and also due to the complicity of the regime's patron, Russia.

The denial of humanitarian aid is a war crime, pure and simple. Thousands are dying of starvation. Cases of tuberculosis, polio, typhoid, and other diseases are expanding at an exponential rate. None of this is an accident. The Assad regime is using forced starvation and forced sieges as a weapon to destroy the Syrian people.

Last month I met in the Senate with Syrians who had survived the chemical weapons attacks carried out by the Assad regime in August of 2013. They described in gruesome detail what they and their families, many young children, endured in August. But the most shocking moment of the interview came when a 22-year-old survivor, who had fled Syria through Lebanon, said if she had to pick, she would rather die a death because of chemical weapons than be hit by a barrel bomb or starved to death because death by chemical weapons would be quicker.

In recent weeks nothing has epitomized the brutality of the regime more than the use of these barrel bombs. The bombs are crude weapons. They are simple oil drums that are filled with shrapnel and explosives. Helicopters often deliver the weapons, and helicopters often hover over neighborhoods for minutes to just scare everyone who knows what is coming. The barrel bombs drop. They explode shrapnel and level neighborhoods.

This is an example of a neighborhood in Aleppo. At one point hundreds were killed when barrel bombs were dropped on Aleppo earlier this month. We see the size and scope of the devastation and see families and their children fleeing the area in the aftermath of a barrel bomb, and this is going on every day in Syria. Secretary Kerry has rightly called these barrel bomb attacks unacceptable and barbaric.

The primary architect of these crimes is Bashar Assad, but he has a patron who funds and supports what he does and who has the ability to stop the atrocities. Russia is Assad's principal support, and since the start of the Syrian civil war Russia has shown it is complicit in these war crimes. But it is also capable of stopping them.

In the United Nations Russia has used its veto power and threat of veto on the Security Council numerous times to block international action to help the Syrian people. Three of these vetoes were used to block basic humanitarian aid. What possible reason could any civilized nation have to deny war victims food and medical supplies?

But Russia has shown it can be persuaded or shamed into taking action to promote the basic safety of the Syrian citizens. In August, with the threat of U.S. military action to punish the Assad regime for use of chemical weapons against its own civilians, Russia realized it could no longer be the sole global apologist for this atrocity. So it persuaded Syria to admit to the crime, acknowledge the existence of a stockpile, and commit to the complete destruction of these inhumane weapons. While that process has been slow, the weaponry has not been used since Russia realized the world would not tolerate such a clear violation of international law.

Similarly, after repeatedly blocking U.N. action to deliver humanitarian aid in Syria, Russia decided, in the midst of the Sochi Olympics, it could

no longer stand in the way of basic humanitarian aid. The eyes of the world were on it and it knew it could no longer be seen as the sole obstacle blocking people from receiving food and medicine. So it finally agreed to U.N. Security Council Resolution 2139 calling for the provision of humanitarian aid inside Syria.

When Russia could no longer comfortably block progress, when the eyes of the world were on it in the middle of the Olympics last week, it finally joined with the rest of the world in calling on Syria to allow aid to its people. In the aftermath of that resolution, the real test lies ahead, because those were words on paper and now we must see whether the aid will be delivered.

This is the situation in Syria today. This is a recent photo from a suburb of Damascus that has been under siege by the Assad regime without access to food and basic medical care. Witness this photo. Look at the destruction; look at the rubble; look at the throng of hungry people stretching to oblivion in the distance. See the hunger in their faces and bodies, and look at the questions in their eyes. It is incumbent upon the Syrian regime to allow unhindered access of humanitarian aid to all Syrians. Opposition groups have that same obligation.

In conclusion, let me say a final word about Russian responsibility to respond to these poor Syrian people. When the Russian Government and its people see this picture, it should remind them of their own history. During the siege of Leningrad during World War II, the Nazis deliberately used these same techniques and tactics—forced starvation and siege—as a tactic of war to cause horrible deprivation to the Russian population of that city. Russians should look in the eyes of these victims of intentional starvation and grapple with their responsibility to them.

Russia can cause the Assad regime, just as it did in August, to open access so these people can have food and medicine. Russia has finally agreed to words on paper at the U.N., but the world will watch the actions of this nation.

One final thought. When Senator KING and I were traveling last week in the Middle East, we went to other countries as well. In one country, where we are engaged in a back-and-forth over the provision of U.S. military assistance, where we are raising what we think are legitimate questions about some democracy reforms this nation needs to undertake if we are to be better and better partners, a leader of that nation said to me: If the United States won't provide assistance, then we will find a way to make Russia our partner.

Well, to anyone who thinks making Russia your partner is a good thing, you ought to look at this photo too, because this is what has become of Syria choosing Russia as its principal part-

ner. Is this the kind of partner you want?

We must keep the spotlight on these atrocities; we must keep the spotlight on Assad's responsibility; we must keep the spotlight on Russia's complicity to bring an end to these atrocities and work with other nations to find a resolution to the Syrian civil war.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. BOOKER). The Senator from Missouri.

Mr. BLUNT. Mr. President, first of all, I want to say I am glad Senator KAINE has been here talking about this important issue today—the tragedy of Syria, the tragedy of the barrel bombs, this hideous way to kill people where you fly over with helicopters and first terrorize people who are wondering where you are going to drop these weapons, and then basically shove them out the side door of a helicopter, and the Russian complicity in this.

We are seeing even today that Russia is beginning to flex its muscles as it relates to the people of Ukraine. I had the Prime Minister from Georgia in to see me on Monday, and of course the day the Olympics were over the Russians were there the next day, more aggressively, partitioning off that part of Georgia they have seized in the last couple of years, the same argument they could easily try to make in Ukraine.

Ukraine, of the Soviet satellite states, is the one that has potentially the most future positive impact on Russia, if they could get it back. The countries of the West, the countries of the European Union, and the United States should be aggressively uniting and trying to reinforce the desire for people in Ukraine to want to have economic freedom and want to have personal freedom, and sending the strongest possible message against those who work against that, whether they are in Russia or whether they were complicit in the activities of Ukraine.

With this sudden moving around of Russian troops today, unannounced until just the last few hours that they would be maneuvering, it is usually no coincidence the Russians are moving troops around at a time of crisis on their borders. We should be very vigilant in sending the message of freedom, the message of supporting people who want freedom.

My concern about Syria is that our policy hasn't worked there either and, frankly, our policy hasn't worked in such a way that it makes it hard for us now to say there will be consequences for Russia if something happens in Ukraine. We need to be sure the world knows, when the United States talks about consequences, that there will be consequences, they will be meaningful, they will be certain, and that things such as are happening in Syria can't be allowed to continue, and worse things, such as those happening in Ukraine, can't be allowed to happen.

HEALTH CARE

I came to the floor today to talk about health care again. I heard the leader's comments over the weekend—Senator REID's comments—where he is referring to the President's health care plan. He said: There are plenty of horror stories being told. Then Senator REID said: They are, all of them, untrue. All of them are untrue.

I don't think anybody has come to the floor more frequently than I have in the last 2 months, 3 months, 10 weeks. I believe I have been coming to the floor every week, the 10 weeks we were in session, with stories from Missourians. We call them. We talk to them about it. We say: Senator BLUNT is going to the floor and he is going to talk about what you have talked to us about. He would like to mention your first name, where you are from, but if you don't want him to do that, he won't do that. In virtually every case, they say: We told you these stories because we want other people to know. We want people to know how we are being affected by the President's health care bill.

They seem to have plenty of facts backing them up, way beyond Senator REID's assertion that all of them are untrue. They are not all untrue. In fact, I have every reason to believe they are all true, and there are many more stories out there to be told.

Today I wanted to talk about the changes in Medicare Advantage and I had to have some discussion with our team, and they asked: Well, how many of these stories are you not going to tell this week if you just tell the stories about Medicare Advantage? If you are in agreement with Senator REID's view of the world, I guess you think the active imagination of Missourians is running wild, because they are contacting our office constantly telling us about higher premiums, higher deductibles, insurance they used to have that worked and insurance that doesn't work, and it doesn't work because the Federal Government, without thinking through the goal of trying to be sure more people had access to insurance, didn't think about all of the unintended consequences.

The latest broken promise—I am afraid it won't be the last; I wish it would be the last broken promise, but it won't be the last, I suspect—relates to the 15 million people in America who have Medicare Advantage—something they liked and something they are not going to be able to have, in many cases, the way they used to have it. This is another application of that promise of if you like your insurance, you can keep it. Well, all the 15 million Americans who have Medicare Advantage, many of them, are going to find they can't keep it. And before this is over, all of them may find out they can't keep it.

The President's health care plan has already cut hundreds of billions of dollars from Medicare—not to save Medicare but to fund the new program. Everybody knows Medicare is one of the

great challenges we have going forward. How are we going to maintain Medicare? Only in Washington would you be able to get by with saying: Medicare is in real trouble, so let's cut it to start another program. This is the only place in America you wouldn't be laughed off the city council dais or off the legislative floor if you said: We have this one program that is in big trouble. We are not going to do anything to reform it, we are just going to cut it so we can start another program. Yet that is what has happened here.

We have already cut Medicare by \$300 billion—that is Medicare Advantage—and on top of this cut to Medicare Advantage we now see that plans are being changed, and they are being changed in significant ways.

Why did we have Medicare Advantage for States such as mine—the State of Missouri—with lots of rural areas, lots of rural hospitals, without always having competitive health care providers? Medicare Advantage provided the competition. It was that competition that made Medicare Advantage and Medicare Part D work and made them work at much less cost than anybody had anticipated. The marketplace works if you focus on a competitive marketplace rather than trying to run health care to be sure there is competition out there. That is what Medicare Advantage did. In our State, 1 out of 4 people on Medicare is on Medicare Advantage—237,000 Missourians on Medicare Advantage.

On February 14, I joined my colleagues in urging CMS not to make any more cuts to Medicare Advantage. There were 40 of us who signed that letter, and 19 of the 40 Senators who signed that letter were Democrats, with 21 Republicans. So there is a pretty bipartisan sense that something must be happening out there to hurt these programs. That is true, not untrue.

Why would we continue to do that? I don't know. So I have joined the Republican leaders in a letter this week calling on Secretary Sebelius to stop moving forward with these misguided policies that do things that impact people on Medicare Advantage; that do things that impact people who had health insurance with a deductible they could afford but now no longer have.

The administration's proposals continue once again to contradict the promise that if you had health care you liked, you could keep your health care policy; that if you had doctors you liked, you could keep your doctors. More and more people are seeing that is not true.

These many stories I have heard I firmly believe to be true, not untrue, no matter what the majority leader of the Senate might have said. Let me share a few of those today as I move toward the conclusion of what I want to talk about today.

Darcie from Kansas City, MO, is a registered nurse and works with Medi-

care patients daily. She sees firsthand the effect the rising expenses on Medicare Advantage are having on people she deals with. This is a quote from her letter:

Our seniors and other Medicare Advantage members should not, as they already do, have to make choices between paying for medicines and other healthcare related expenses or food or housing expenses.

I hope you are able to see the bigger picture, as I do, as a 30-year-old professional nurse who is on the frontlines each and every day taking care of these individuals and their families.

This sounds truthful to me.

Edward and his wife, from Saint Peters, MO, live on a fixed income. He said:

My wife and I are retired seniors living on a fixed income. I have Medicare Advantage, which is provided by Mercy—a Missouri based health insurance company. I am told I will lose coverage next year due to ObamaCare cuts. Why must the cost of ObamaCare—which Missourians did not want—be paid by cuts to seniors? Please change the ObamaCare law to leave Medicare Advantage alone.

Again, 19 Democrats and 21 Republicans signed a letter last week asking the same question. This letter didn't even say: Go back and reverse what you have done. Just stop making these cuts being made right now.

Ronald from Raytown, MO, says his copay has increased as a result of the administration's cuts to Medicare Advantage plans.

Please protect our Medicare Advantage plans. As you know, Medicare is presently underfunded. I do not appreciate those that permit Obama to willfully take [hundreds of billions of] dollars that we seniors have paid into Medicare and use those monies to fund ObamaCare. I am counting on you to protect our Medicare Advantage plans and realize that the less government involvement in our Medicare Advantage plans, the more efficient the plan. As a result of ObamaCare, my copay has increased.

My guess is Ronald knows whether or not his copay has increased. In speaking with him, I am certainly persuaded that the facts he is presenting—like the other people we are talking about today—are absolutely true.

Jennifer from Blue Springs, MO, says:

My husband and I are both on Medicare already . . . the co-pays for our "Medicare Advantage" plans have doubled and, in some cases, tripled from 2013 to 2014 . . . [and that is why I'm responding with a nightmare story].

The other thing Jennifer said is she and her husband are retired. They are musicians, and they had a business where they would go to nursing homes and play gospel music just for their expenses. She points out that because of the increased health care costs, nursing homes no longer have room in their budget for something that is entertaining, such as live gospel music. The reverberations of what happens when the government decides that the government is better prepared to manage not just Medicare and Medicaid—as if we didn't have enough challenges al-

ready—but 16 percent or 17 percent of the economy are seen out there every day.

I certainly believe there have to be some people who are benefiting from this, but the numbers don't suggest that the overall benefit is nearly as good as the overall damage: people losing insurance at greater numbers than people getting insurance; premiums going up more than going down; deductibles rising.

It would be nice for those who supported this to convince people that all these stories are untrue, but I think too many people have true stories to tell for their neighbors and their friends not to realize what is happening because of this government interference with a health care system that was working instead of doing the handful of things we could have done to make the best health care system in the world work better. They were there. They were offered. The President knew they were there. That is not the course we followed, and the course we are following is not leading to a place where most Americans want to be.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Indiana.

Mr. COATS. Mr. President, may I inquire what the order is in morning business relative to time?

The PRESIDING OFFICER. There is 15 minutes remaining on the Republican side.

IRAN

Mr. COATS. Mr. President, I appreciate this opportunity to come to the floor to speak about a different subject but one which is imminent and necessary for us to consider; that is, the current Iranian sanctions issue.

Back in 2007, when Iran had "only" about 700 centrifuges spinning to enrich uranium, we—and by "we," I mean nearly the entire international community—determined that the behavior by the Iranian regime was simply too dangerous to tolerate. The U.N. Security Council began the process of passing a series of resolutions demanding that Iran stop enriching uranium entirely. The United States, led by many here in the Senate, began the very careful and painstaking process of amassing an international coalition to back increasingly tough sanctions, all aimed explicitly at forcing the Iranian regime to end enrichment activities.

The reason for this was because we believed a nuclear weapons-capable or -armed Iran posed an imminent threat not just to the Middle East but to the world community. That was the consensus agreed to by the world community and supported by resolution after resolution from the Security Council of the United Nations and by proclamations by not only our country but by countries around the world.

The entire effort had, for some years, been devoted entirely to ending uranium enrichment activities. The consensus was that nuclear weapon possession or capability posed unacceptable