

coming into the United States, and tragically, sadly, they were right.

In the wake of that crisis last summer, it became clear that the President's failed immigration policies, including his deferred action program and his overall lack of seriousness when it came to immigration enforcement, played a role in inducing thousands of families to risk their lives to travel to the United States.

Until recently, we had perhaps been lulled into the misconception that this flood of migrants had stopped. But over the weekend, I was startled by news reports—perhaps I shouldn't have been surprised but I was—that suggest this downward trend has started to reverse and in a big way. According to these reports, smugglers were again bringing hundreds of women and children into the United States across the Rio Grande.

One from the New York Times noted that according to official data, “border Patrol apprehensions of migrant families . . . have increased 150 percent” from last year. The number of unaccompanied children has more than doubled.

The bottom line is that, clearly, there is virtually nothing being done to deter these children and their families from illegally crossing the border and little or no consequences when they do.

I have to point out that the administration has done virtually nothing to make sure these children are not exposed to the same criminal organizations operating in this country. In fact, current law requires these children to be released by the Department of Health and Human Services to sponsors without any assurance or systemic protections that they are being sent to a safe environment. There are no criminal background checks. They are not required to be actual family members, and they could well be some extension of the same criminal organizations that smuggled them into the United States in the first place.

It is shocking to me that the Senate would not be moved to act on this because, of course, we passed a large anti-human trafficking law this last spring with a 99-to-0 vote. But to sit quietly while these children continue to stream across our border and are placed in the hands of potentially dangerous individuals is unacceptable.

Earlier this year, four individuals were indicted for their involvement in a trafficking ring that smuggled unaccompanied Guatemalan children into the country and forced them into slave labor at a farm in Ohio. These children were not only forced to work long hours, but they were abused and threatened and exploited. Many of them could have been spared if the Federal Government and Health and Human Services had an adequate system for screening and vetting the sponsors of these unaccompanied minors.

We have to do a better job of protecting these children, which is why I recently joined a letter with the chair-

man of the Senate Judiciary Committee demanding answers from the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Health and Human Services.

It is clear that the Federal Government needs to step up and create a more effective review process before releasing these children to strangers and perhaps criminals. Our government has a duty to protect them once they are here and to ensure that they are no longer preyed upon by criminals and human traffickers.

Given the administration's inability to deter illegal immigration and the Federal Government's failure to deal with them reasonably, rationally, and humanely when they get here, we have every reason to believe that illegal immigration surges of this nature will continue and will grow until we reform this system. That is why I intend to introduce a piece of legislation called the HUMANE Act, which will reform the system to end the practice of automatic catch-and-release to nongovernmental sponsors. It would enhance the screening of these children to determine if they are victims of crime or in need of some specialized care. It will make sure they get a swift and fair court determination on whether or not they are eligible for any protected status under our immigration laws.

The HUMANE Act would also help ensure that if these children are in need of humanitarian assistance, they will never be released to sex offenders, criminals, or others who will seek to harm them. Of course, preventing these surges is not just a humanitarian issue; it is a national security issue as well. By tying up our law enforcement, customs, and other security officials with humanitarian care obligations, the cartels and other transnational criminal organizations create an environment where it is much easier to traffic drugs, weapons, and other contraband.

We know there are increasing ties between terrorist organizations and drug cartels, so the threat that they will work together to exploit another humanitarian crisis is very real. For instance, last year before the Senate Armed Services Committee, SOUTHCOM's commander, John Kelly, stated that he was “troubled by the financial and operational overlap between criminal and terrorist networks in the [Central American] region.”

He went on to say: “Although the extent of criminal-terrorist cooperation is unclear, what is clear is that terrorists and militant organizations easily tap into the international illicit marketplace to underwrite their activities and obtain arms and funding to conduct operations.”

I am not just talking about economic migrants. I am talking about immigrants from around the world who can potentially get through our southern border virtually at will. I am talking about transnational criminal organizations determined to spread violence and import narcotics into the United States.

I hope the administration will take these most recent reports seriously, before we experience once again the horrifying humanitarian disaster we experienced in 2014. But nothing short of real improvements to border security and our laws will work.

Mr. President, I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Maryland.

BURUNDI

Mr. CARDIN. Mr. President, I rise to call for urgent action to prevent widespread violence and mass atrocities in Burundi. Let us not allow Burundi to become the next Rwanda or Darfur. We are at a critical juncture. I call upon the Burundian Government and opposition to respect the spirit of the 2000 Arusha agreement and immediately stop all violence, disarm militias, including youth militia aligned with the government, and urge all legitimate stakeholders to agree to participate in an inclusive dialogue to determine a path forward for their country.

As my colleagues may know, the country has been in turmoil since April, when President Pierre Nkurunziza decided to run for a third term. His decision, which many feel violated the spirit of the very agreement that ended the Burundi 12-year civil war and the Burundian Constitution itself, has led to widespread violence. An attempted coup in May revealed an alarming split in the militia's military ranks, and I came to the floor in June to discuss my concern that the situation could escalate. Unfortunately, I was correct. It has. At that time, 90,000 people had fled the country, and now there are over 200,000 refugees. In June, an estimated 21 people had died during the protest. The U.N. now estimates that nearly 250 people have been killed since April, some at the hands of the security forces and others in a series of tit-for-tat targeted assassinations and killings.

The violence has taken on troubling overtones. Bodies of those who have been clearly victims of execution-style killings are found daily in the streets of Bujumbura, Burundi's capital. The families of political opponents are now being targeted and killed. Government officials have been murdered.

In November, Burundian officials engaged in alarming rhetoric reminiscent of language used to incite and carry out the genocide in Rwanda. The government was forced to issue a letter that claimed that the statements made by the President and the president of the senate were not intended to foment such actions. Intended or not, such comments are deeply disturbing.

The international community has engaged, but I fear our efforts may not be enough. I was very pleased to see the African Union Peace and the Security Council's October 17 communiqué, which urged dialogue, called for deployment of additional human rights monitors, and threatened targeted

sanctions against those who contribute to the escalation of violence and act as spoilers to a political solution. It sent a strong message to all parties that continued violence will not be tolerated and that an inclusive dialogue—one that includes the Burundian opposition that has taken refuge outside the country—is the only way to restore stability. The United Nations Security Council took a much needed step by approving a resolution in late November. The European Union has been forward leaning, imposing sanctions on government officials and requesting a dialogue with the government to discuss the current situation under the provisions of the Cotonou Agreement related to democracy and human rights.

The United States has been actively engaged in preventive action and diplomacy for some time. On November 23, President Obama issued an Executive order sanctioning four individuals whose actions have threatened the peace and security of Burundi. He also announced that as of January, Burundi will no longer be eligible for preferential trade benefits under the African Growth and Opportunity Act. Our Special Envoy for the Great Lakes, Tom Perriello, has been in the region numerous times. High-ranking officials, including our United Nations Ambassador and the Secretary of State have raised Burundi with our international partners on numerous occasions. Ambassador Power has traveled there herself, and I applaud the administration's consistent attention to the concerns of Burundi.

However, the violence continues. We must redouble our efforts to support a political solution to this current crisis. Let me be clear. There is no substitute for a commitment by the Burundians themselves when it comes to finding a way forward. They themselves must choose the path of peace, but I firmly believe we, in cooperation with our international partners, can provide the right incentives for them to do that. We can take other meaningful actions in pursuit of an agreement.

First, we must help the African Union to finalize contingency plans for an African-led mission to prevent widespread violence in the country.

Second, I call upon the AU to convene a meeting with special envoys from the United Nations, African Union, United States, European Union, and Belgium, as well as representatives from the East African community, to discuss coordination among donors, the United Nations, the AU, and the Security Council's recommendations and to identify ways that the international actors can support the increased number of human rights monitors and military observers authorized by the AU in October.

Third, it is imperative that we help put in place mechanisms for accountability for those who have engaged in extrajudicial killings during this period of time. Those who have committed these atrocities must be held

accountable. The international community must be firm about this. We cannot allow those who perpetrate these crimes to go unpunished.

The United States has made a promise to actively prevent the commission of mass atrocities. As the unrest continues, people are suffering in refugee camps or living in fear in their homes, afraid to go out. Violence is on the rise, the economy is in a downward spiral, and civil space is closed. Every day that goes by without a civil solution the probability of atrocities increases. Preventing widespread violence and mass atrocities is everyone's business. Diplomatic engagement to prevent political violence that has the potential to become ethnically based killing is exactly what we and the rest of the international community must focus on addressing.

I submit to you that acting to prevent this from happening is all of our collective business, and I urge continued action to do so.

I suggest the absence of a quorum.

The PRESIDING OFFICER (Mr. FLAKE). The clerk will call the roll.

The bill clerk proceeded to call the roll.

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

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

OBAMACARE

Mr. THUNE. Mr. President, 5 years ago, days after President Obama signed the Affordable Care Act into law, the senior Democratic Senator from New York went on "Meet the Press" to discuss the bill. He told the host: "Well, I think as people learn about the bill, and now that the bill is enacted, it's going to become more and more popular." I don't need to tell anyone that never happened.

Five years after ObamaCare was enacted, a majority of Americans disapproved the law, and that is a pattern we have seen since the law's passage. Why has the law failed to earn the support Democrats predicted? For one simple reason: The law is just not working as President Obama promised it would. The Affordable Care Act was supposed to lower health care premiums. It didn't. It was supposed to reduce health care costs. It didn't. It was supposed to protect the health care plans that Americans wanted to keep. It didn't. The law was sold as a health care solution, but it turned out to be yet another health care problem.

Five years after the law's passage, here is where we are: Americans with job-based insurance are paying more for their health care, with the average employee seeing a \$400 increase in his or her deductible since 2010. Small business employees have fared even worse, with average deductibles now close to \$2,000. And Americans are paying more for their premiums as well. An average annual premium contribu-

tion for family coverage is currently \$12,591, up from \$9,773 in 2010. That is nearly \$3,000 in additional premium costs or another \$250 a month. For many families, that comes on top of an increase in their deductible. Meanwhile, thousands of part-time workers have lost their job-based insurance thanks to ObamaCare mandates that encouraged several large employers to stop offering health benefits to part-time employees.

The situation with the exchanges is no better. Exchange premiums will rise once again this year, with many Americans facing rate increases in the double digits.

Over the past few months, I have heard from numerous constituents wondering how they will be able to afford the massive premium increases they are facing. One constituent in Wessington, SD, wrote to tell me that her and her husband's health care plan is going from \$17,194 this year to a staggering \$25,370 next year. That is an annual increase of more than \$8,000. What family can afford an \$8,000 increase in expenses from one year to the next?

Another constituent of mine wrote to tell me this:

We just received our rate increase for our family health insurance. We have been paying \$1,283 a month and the \$557.45 increase will bring it up to \$1,841.26. This amount has gone from 26 percent to 37 percent of our income. It is over twice of our house payment. . . . After having insurance coverage for the past 38 years, we are faced with dropping coverage, which is ironic since that is not the purpose of the Affordable Care Act. We are considering dropping insurance and facing the penalty just so we can continue to live in our house, pay our bills, and buy groceries.

That is from a constituent of mine in South Dakota.

I have received far too many letters like these from individuals who are facing enormous premium increases.

Another constituent wrote to me and said they are facing a 69-percent premium increase—69 percent. She and her husband are facing a \$22,884 insurance bill. She could buy a brand-new car for less than that.

So it is no surprise that a recent survey from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation found that nearly 80 percent of uninsured Americans who have looked for insurance report that they cannot find or cannot afford to buy health insurance. The grim reality for millions of Americans is that the Affordable Care Act is anything but affordable.

Unfortunately, higher health care costs are just one of the problems with this law. ObamaCare has already reduced Americans' health care choices. Faced with expensive ObamaCare mandates, insurance companies have chosen one of the few methods left to them to control costs, and that is restricting consumers' choice of doctors and hospitals. Americans were promised they could keep the doctor they liked, but for many Americans, that is not true.