

RECOGNIZING THE LAS VEGAS LATIN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I wish to recognize the 40th anniversary of the Las Vegas Latin Chamber of Commerce.

Since its inception, the Latin Chamber of Commerce has been a champion for the Hispanic business community in Nevada. In working to fulfill its mission of promoting the success of its members and the more than 18,000 Hispanic-owned small businesses in the Silver State, the chamber is driving growth in Nevada and enriching the U.S. economy. By cultivating positive business, cultural, and educational relationships and expanding opportunities for Latino businessowners, the Latin Chamber of Commerce has ensured the success of hundreds of new businesses and transformed the very fabric of southern Nevada.

The Latin Chamber of Commerce was founded nearly four decades ago by a handful of determined individuals who were seeking the resources and support necessary to realize their personal and professional goals. Under the leadership of Arturo Cambeiro, the organization's first president, the chamber developed the foundation needed to become a leading advocate for Hispanic-owned businesses and Latino entrepreneurs. Today, the Latin Chamber of Commerce has grown to include more than 1,500 members throughout the Silver State, making it one of the largest organizations of its kind in the country. I applaud the Latin Chamber of Commerce for its 40th anniversary of dedicated service to the Hispanic community. The chamber's work is truly appreciated and admired.

I also commend the leadership of the Latin Chamber of Commerce, particularly Mr. Otto Merida and Ms. Victoria Napoles-Earl. Their tireless commitment to the Latino business community has played a critical role in the growth and success of the chamber. For the last 40 years, Mr. Merida has dedicated his work to developing and expanding the presence of the Latin Chamber of Commerce in southern Nevada. He has worked hard to fulfill the Chamber's mission and led the organization with the highest standards, currently serving as the organization's chief executive officer. Ms. Napoles-Earl joined the chamber in 1987 and recently announced her retirement after 30 years of service. I would like to congratulate her on her upcoming retirement and career accomplishments. From starting as the chamber's office manager to becoming its senior vice president, Ms. Napoles-Earl has dedicated her career to investing in Latino-owned businesses. During their distinguished careers, Mr. Merida and Ms. Napoles-Earl have successfully secured millions of dollars in funding for Latino businessowners, including grants, loans, and contracts. On behalf of the chamber and the thousands of Hispanic-owned businesses in Nevada, Mr. Merida and Ms. Napoles-Earl have

effectively advocated for policies that help Latino entrepreneurs start and expand their business.

In addition to their roles at the Latin Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Merida and Ms. Napoles are active members in the community and have held various leadership positions at the State and local levels. Mr. Merida has worked for the State of Nevada's Department of Education, served as chair of the Las Vegas Housing Authority, and was appointed to the Nevada Commission on Economic Development. Ms. Napoles-Earl has served as a commissioner for the Nevada Commission on Minority Affairs and on the board of directors of Dignity Health's St. Rose Dominican Hospitals. I have had the honor and privilege of working closely with Mr. Merida and Ms. Napoles-Earl throughout my time in Congress, and I can say without reservation that the Hispanic business community in Nevada is fortunate to have them working on its behalf. You will be hard pressed to find more effective advocates.

As the Latin Chamber of Commerce begins its next chapter, I wish them continued success for years to come and thank them for supporting the economic growth and development of Latino entrepreneurs for 40 years and counting.

RECOGNIZING THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF PLANNED PARENTHOOD OF NORTHERN NEW ENGLAND

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, this week, Planned Parenthood of Northern New England marked its 50th anniversary with a well-attended gathering in South Burlington, VT. The event came less than a week after the deadly tragedy at a Planned Parenthood center in Colorado. The weight of that tragedy, more than 2,500 miles away from Vermont, was evident as those in the crowd bowed their heads in a moment of silence as the names of victims were read. But this South Burlington gathering also illustrated the depth of support for an organization that plays a critical role in health care for women of all ages throughout Vermont, throughout New England, and throughout our country.

The Planned Parenthood Association of Vermont began in 1965 when a small but active band of women gathered at the Unitarian Church in Burlington. Within the next 3 years, Maine and New Hampshire also established family planning centers, and by the mid-1980s, Planned Parenthood of Northern New England was formed.

In 2014 alone, Planned Parenthood centers around Vermont provided vital primary and preventive services to over 16,000 patients. In a rural State like Vermont, the need for health care providers in remote areas is acute. More than 90 percent of Vermont's Planned Parenthood centers are located in rural or medically underserved areas. Many Vermonters describe

Planned Parenthood as their primary source of health care. In just one example, without the services that Planned Parenthood provides, thousands of low-income women in Vermont would lose their ability to have regular cancer screenings that could save their lives.

Over five decades, Planned Parenthood has weathered many challenges that include ensuring the safety of its own health care providers. In the aftermath of 9/11, more than 500 anthrax threat letters were sent to Planned Parenthood locations and other reproductive health care providers; yet it seems unimaginable that we are here in December 2015, in the U.S. Senate, once again debating whether to defund an organization that does so much to ensure the health and well-being of women across the country.

In August I spoke in opposition to this misguided, distortion-filled, partisan effort. I said at the time that the issue was unfortunately all too familiar. With the critical issues that face us today, why are we spending our time and energy on this ideologically driven effort to bar funding for women's health centers? I am saddened that we are even talking about this provision today, not even 1 week since a gunman stormed that Planned Parenthood in Colorado and caused such carnage. This is shameful, and it is cynical. It is time for the mean-spirited assault on women's health care to end.

I was heartened by the supporters, both women and men, who turned out to mark the 50th anniversary of Planned Parenthood of Northern New England this week in South Burlington. They included the next generation of young women who have been "passed the torch" to stand up for their rights to health care and reproductive freedom. They are committed to making sure Planned Parenthood will be around for another 50 years—and they give me hope. Let us not turn our backs on them by turning back the clock.

SUPPORTING THE COFFEE FARMERS IN THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF THE CONGO

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, like many Senators, I have followed the appalling situation facing citizens of the Eastern Congo, where armed groups have fought for years over control of minerals and territory, pillaging, raping, and killing civilians in the process.

The innocent people who struggle to survive in the midst of this violence and destruction rely on subsistence agriculture, as well as raising crops for export; yet their own government makes it doubly difficult.

For decades, coffee was an important agricultural export from Eastern Congo. But after years of armed conflict, official coffee exports have reportedly decreased by over 80 percent from peak levels 30 years ago. The majority of this coffee is produced by

smallholder farmers, most of whom are women, and for whom coffee is a significant source of income.

Today a consortium, including the Eastern Congo Initiative, the Howard Buffett Foundation, and Starbucks Coffee Company, are trying to help Congolese farmers by revitalizing the industry. Needed infrastructure has been built, a supply chain is in place, and America's largest coffee company has provided a reliable buyer. This is a welcome and worthwhile effort to improve the lives of people in rural Congolese communities that should have the support of the Congolese Government.

Despite this collective effort, Congolese coffee farmers are being crippled by oppressive taxes that make their coffee uncompetitive in the global marketplace. While Congo's official export tax rate is 0.25 percent, many export officials reportedly continue to levy taxes of 7.5 percent, which is the previous rate. In addition, there are often informal tax levies that charge another 3 to 8 percent. These excessive taxes force exporters to pay smallholder farmers less for their coffee, with the result that farmers smuggle their crop into neighboring countries. The livelihoods of these farmers and the success of the Eastern Congo Initiative-Buffett-Starbucks joint venture are put at risk by the Congolese Government's actions.

I want to yield to Senator GRAHAM, who has traveled to Africa and observed the challenges facing small farmers like those I have mentioned.

Mr. GRAHAM. I want to thank my friend from Vermont with whom I have worked for years to help improve the lives of small farmers in Africa and elsewhere. The situation facing coffee farmers in the Eastern Congo should concern all Senators, as there is an opportunity, thanks to the Eastern Congo Initiative, the Buffett Foundation, and Starbucks, to significantly increase the income of people who have long struggled to get out of poverty. The Congolese Government should take immediate steps to eliminate this unofficial tax rate and other specious financial charges that are jeopardizing the livelihoods of their own people. The government must be part of the solution—and not the problem—to Congo's myriad challenges.

Mr. LEAHY. I thank the Senator from South Carolina, the chairman of the Subcommittee on State and Foreign Operations, who chaired a hearing earlier this year when we heard compelling testimony about this subject.

I ask my friend from Delaware, the former chairman of the Subcommittee on Africa, who has traveled to Africa many times, including this year with President Obama, to discuss how this situation in the Eastern Congo relates to the requirements of the African Growth and Opportunity Act.

Mr. COONS. I thank the Senator from Vermont for calling the Senate's attention to the challenges facing coffee

producers in the Eastern Congo. The Congress passed the African Growth and Opportunity Act, AGOA, to advance economic growth and political stability in sub-Saharan Africa. AGOA furthers these objectives by offering trade benefits to countries that meet certain requirements, including commitments to policies that alleviate poverty and reflect market based economic principles. Moreover, as part of this year's AGOA renewal, we included provisions to enhance industries where African women are making strong contributions. Since its inception, exports from AGOA countries to the United States have grown 300 percent. Agriculture is the largest employer in Africa, and in the years to come, farming can play a key role in accelerating exports even further and realizing the vision of AGOA.

To meet the standards of AGOA and gain eligibility, the Congolese Government must do away with the excessive export and other taxes currently being levied on its coffee farmers. Impeding the growth of their coffee industry and lowering the standard of living of their own farmers is inconsistent with the language, intent, and spirit of AGOA. Lowering this tax burden should be required before the Democratic Republic of the Congo is granted AGOA benefits.

Ms. STABENOW. I thank the senior Senator from Vermont for his leadership on this issue. Last year, I had the privilege of leading the first all-women Senate delegation to sub-Saharan Africa to examine food, agriculture, and the critical role women play in local economies. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, nearly 50 percent of all the agricultural work in the region is done by women.

Yet, too often, women are not afforded equal opportunities to own property, earn an education, or participate in the political process. That is why I was eager to lead two bipartisan provisions included in the recent AGOA renewal. The first makes clear that we expect our African trading partners to make progress toward establishing policies that support men and women. And the second expands existing agricultural trade technical assistance programs at USDA and USAID and prioritizes outreach to organizations and sectors that support women.

At its core, AGOA is about creating the building blocks of an improved trading relationship with sub-Saharan African nations. For the Democratic Republic of the Congo, coffee production presents a critical export opportunity. That is why we must insist that the Congolese Government addresses its inconsistent and burdensome export taxes on coffee producers—most of whom are women—before regaining eligibility for AGOA benefits. We have an opportunity to send a strong message to our African trading partners that we expect them to recognize how vital women are to the development of those nations' economies.

Ms. CANTWELL. I thank the senior Senator from Vermont for his leadership on this issue. Last year, I travelled to sub-Saharan Africa with Senator STABENOW. In Africa, we saw firsthand that empowering women and girls as leaders in agriculture is important to promoting economic development. When we returned, we fought to make sure promoting economic opportunities for women was an important aspect of renewal of the African Growth and Opportunity Act.

Investing in women produces a good return on investment. According to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, if women had the same access to economic resources as men, this could increase agricultural productivity by 20-30 percent.

The Congolese Government's export taxes on coffee producers have the opposite effect. It unfairly burdens women. It should be repealed before the Democratic Republic of the Congo receives any additional AGOA benefits.

Mr. ISAKSON. I want to thank the Senator from South Carolina and the Senator from Vermont for their important work in improving United States foreign assistance. I thank Senator LEAHY for bringing this issue to our attention today. The Senator from Delaware and I have worked for years on the Senate Foreign Relations Subcommittee on African Affairs, and I look forward to continuing that work. Throughout our travels on the African continent, we have seen the beneficial effects of increased agriculture productivity and better access to markets, facilitated by U.S. economic development and trade preference programs.

I am proud of our work to reauthorize the African Growth and Opportunity Act. We made it stronger, more accountable, and hopefully more accessible to sub-Saharan African countries and their people. Unfortunately, Congo's ineligibility makes export opportunities more difficult for Congolese businessmen and farmers. I echo my colleagues' call on the Congolese Government to become more transparent and responsive to the needs of its people.

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, as you can see, there is bipartisan support for these coffee farmers who face oppressive economic constraints that limit their ability to be competitive in the marketplace and earn a decent living. I join my colleagues who have spoken on this issue today in urging the Congolese Government to address these concerns for the benefit of its people.

VOTE EXPLANATION

Mr. WARNER. Mr. President, due to a prior commitment, I regret I was not present to vote on six amendments to H.R. 3762, the Budget Reconciliation Act. Had I been present, I would have voted yes on amendment No. 2908, Manchin-Toomey expanded background checks, and amendment No. 2910, denying firearms to suspected terrorists. I