

"Billy" Benavides, Jr. died in the Persian Gulf in 1992.

My heart breaks for this family that has given so much to our great Nation. Of his older brother, 9-year-old Joshua said, "He was a very good hero, and he died for our freedom. I will never forget him."

A good hero indeed.

As we watch the dawn of a new day in Iraq, let us never forget that the freedom we enjoy every day in America is bought at a price.

Specialist Perez did not die in vain. He died so that many others could live in security and freedom. And for that sacrifice, we are forever indebted. Our thoughts and prayers are with him and his family today and with the troops who are putting their lives on the line in Iraq.

I yield the floor.

FBI BACKGROUND CHECK SYSTEM

Mr. LEVIN. Mr. President, earlier this week, the Federal Bureau of Investigation released a report on the efficiency and effectiveness of the National Instant Criminal Background Check System, also known as NICS. According to the report, the FBI has improved its ability to respond quickly to gun dealer requests for criminal background checks, with only nine percent of the transactions delayed. These improvements have increased the immediate response rate from an average of 71 percent in early 2001 to 91 percent in 2002.

According to the report, in 2001 the NICS system processed 8.9 million background checks, with approximately 125,000 denials of permission to purchase a gun. While, in 2002, the system performed over 8.4 million checks and denied approximately 121,000 of these purchases. I commend the FBI for its hard work and commitment to improving this important law enforcement tool.

Despite the success of the NICS System and the FBI's hard work, many guns are still being purchased without any background checks being performed. Under current Federal law, criminal background checks on gun purchasers are only required for sales by licensed firearm dealers. Consequently, criminals, fugitives, and terrorists are able to purchase firearms without any background check. They do this by purchasing guns at gun shows. I believe we should require a background check on every gun sale and close the loopholes in Federal law that criminals manipulate to buy and sell guns.

During the last Congress, I cosponsored the Gun Show Background Check Act introduced by Senator JACK REED. I believe this legislation would be a vital tool in preventing guns from getting into the hands of criminals and other ineligible buyers. This bill would simply apply existing law governing background checks to individuals buying firearms at gun shows. This bill is

commonsense gun safety legislation that is supported by a number of major law enforcement organizations including the International Association of Chiefs of Police, the National Troopers Coalition, the International Brotherhood of Police Officers, the Police Executive Research Forum, the Major Cities Chiefs, the National Association of School Resource Officers, the National Black Police Association, the National Organization of Black Law Enforcement Executives, and the Hispanic American Police Command Officers Association.

I believe closing the gun show loophole is an important tool in reducing gun violence and preventing guns from getting into the hands of criminals and foreign terrorists. Since its inception, the National Instant Criminal Background Check System has prevented over 563,000 ineligible buyers from gaining access to guns, but many continue to slip through the gun show loophole. I urge my colleagues to join me in supporting this important piece of gun safety legislation.

FUNDING THE GLOBAL AIR TRAFFIC MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Mr. INHOFE. Mr. President, I would like to take a moment and recognize the brave men and women who flew and supported the mission of the B-2 bomber. The B-2 is a critical asset of our U.S. military and must be supported in the future. The B-2 can carry up to 40,000 pounds of munitions and can strike up to 16 targets in a single pass. The first night of the bombing in Baghdad, 6 B-2s destroyed 92 targets on the first night. B-2s flew nonstop, 36-hour missions from Whiteman AFB in Missouri to Iraq, unscathed. The B-2s targeted everything from airfields to surface-to-air missiles, sometimes changing targets while airborne enroute to Iraq. No other military has this capability with such accuracy and survivability. It is essential we fund the Global Air Traffic Management, GATM, system, the Secure Nuclear Communications and Broadband Connectivity capability, and the repair of the Aft Deck Durability issue for the B-2. We must ensure the B-2 is maintained and modified to keep its lethal edge.

INDICTMENT OF CHARLES TAYLOR

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, yesterday I wanted to give a statement on the indictment of Charles Taylor by the Special Court in Sierra Leone, but due to the rapidly changing events in West Africa and the lack of floor time because of extensive debates on the Defense Authorization and Energy bills, I did not get an opportunity. What follows is the statement that I sent to the State Department, Special Court, and United Nations officials, yesterday, expressing my views on this serious issue.

I rise today to voice my strong support for the decision of the Special Court for Sierra

Leone to indict Charles Taylor for "bearing the greatest responsibility for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and serious violations of international humanitarian law in Sierra Leone." I commend the Court's prosecutor, David Crane, for taking this decisive action.

Since its inception, the Special Court has moved swiftly to indict key figures allegedly involved in some of the worst atrocities that occurred during the brutal civil war in Sierra Leone during the late 1990s. The Court has also made it a priority to emphasize outreach programs to further the reconciliation process and promote the rule of law throughout the country.

Despite important progress, we all know that the Court's work would be grossly deficient if those most responsible for these crimes were not brought to justice because they were too hard to catch, were high officials of a foreign government, or no longer resided inside of Sierra Leone. It would be like the United States deciding against pursuing the perpetrator of an act of terrorism on American soil, that killed or maimed thousands of individuals, because he left the country or was a high-ranking official in a foreign government. That would be unacceptable.

That is precisely why Congress expressed its clear intent that the Special Court for Sierra Leone should pursue those most responsible, irrespective of where they currently reside.

In the report that accompanied the Senate version of the Fiscal Year 2002 Foreign Operations bill, Report 107-58, Congress stated in unambiguous terms: "To build a lasting peace, the Committee believes that it is imperative for the international community to support a tribunal in order to bring to justice those responsible for war crimes and other atrocities in Sierra Leone, irrespective of where they currently reside."

This statement was later endorsed by the Conference Report to the Fiscal Year 2002 Foreign Operations bill, Report 107-345, which put the House of Representatives on record on this issue as well.

Even before these reports were issued, Senators FEINGOLD, FRIST, MCCONNELL and I wrote a letter to Secretary Powell, dated June 20, 2001, which stated: "Because some of the individuals most responsible for the atrocities in Sierra Leone are no longer in the country, we believe it is imperative that the tribunal has the authority to prosecute culpable individuals—including senior Liberian officials—regardless of where they reside. This will prevent such persons from escaping justice simply by leaving the country."

I can safely say that we had one individual especially in mind when we drafted that text: Charles Taylor. I was the principal author of the letter and two Congressional reports referenced above.

The involvement of Charles Taylor in the conflict in Sierra Leone is well documented and I will not go into great detail here. I will simply say that there is no doubt in my mind that he deserves to be brought to justice before the Special Court.

To its credit, the State Department took the advice of Congress. The State Department successfully negotiated an agreement that established the Special Court for Sierra Leone and which did

not contain geographic restrictions on the Prosecutor, allowing him to go after Charles Taylor.

Perhaps the Prosecutor for the Court, David Crane, best described the Special Court's mandate: "My office was given an international mandate by the United Nations and the Republic of Sierra Leone to follow the evidence impartially wherever it leads."

Today, acting on information that Charles Taylor was traveling to Ghana, the Special Court unsealed an indictment for Charles Taylor, originally approved March 7, 2003, and served the outstanding warrant for his arrest on Ghanaian authorities and transmitted the arrest warrant to INTERPOL.

Again, I commend the prosecutor for taking this step. While I understand there are some, including in the Administration, who are concerned about the impact that this may have on the peace process now underway in West Africa, I agree with Mr. Crane's comments on this sensitive issue:

To ensure the legitimacy of these negotiations, it is imperative that the attendees know they are dealing with an indicted war criminal. These negotiations can still move forward, but they must do so without the involvement of this indictee. The evidence upon which this indictment was approved raises serious questions about Taylor's suitability to be a guarantor of any deal, let alone a peace agreement.

The Ghanaian Government needs to act immediately. It needs to uphold the basic tenants of international law, apprehend Charles Taylor and hold him until arrangements can be made to transfer him to the Court. In addition, the State Department needs to send an unequivocal message to Accra that action on this issue is urgently needed.

This may be the only chance that we get for years to bring Charles Taylor to justice. It is imperative that, in its most important moment thus far, the United States and Ghana do everything in their power to apprehend Charles Taylor. If this does not occur, the world will have missed a golden opportunity to bring to justice one of the world's most heinous war criminals and advance the cause of international justice.

In closing, I would like to read into the RECORD Mr. Crane's statement issued today that describes the situation concerning Charles Taylor:

Today, on behalf of the people of Sierra Leone and the international community, I announce the indictment of Charles Ghankay Taylor, also known as Charles Ghankay Macarthur Dapkpama Taylor.

The indictment accuses Taylor of "bearing the greatest responsibility" for war crimes, crimes against humanity, and serious violations of international humanitarian law within the territory of Sierra Leone since 30 November 1996. The indictment was judicially approved on March 7th and until today, was sealed on my request to the Court.

My office was given an international mandate by the United Nations and the Republic of Sierra Leone to follow the evidence impartially wherever it leads. It has led us unequivocally to Taylor.

Upon learning that Taylor was travelling to Ghana, the Registrar of the Special Court

served the outstanding warrant for his arrest on Ghanaian authorities and transmitted the arrest warrant to INTERPOL. This is the first time that his presence outside of Liberia has been publicly confirmed. The Registrar was doing his duty by carrying out the order of the Court.

Furthermore, the timing of this announcement was carefully considered in light of the important peace process begun this week. To ensure the legitimacy of these negotiations, it is imperative that the attendees know they are dealing with an indicted war criminal. These negotiations can still move forward, but they must do so without the involvement of this indictee. The evidence upon which this indictment was approved raises serious questions about Taylor's suitability to be a guarantor of any deal, let alone a peace agreement.

I am aware that many members of the international community have invested a great deal of energy in the current peace talks. I want to make it clear that in reaching my decision to make the indictment public, I have not consulted with any state. I am acting as an independent prosecutor and this decision was based solely on the law.

I also want to send a clear message to all factions fighting in Liberia that they must respect international humanitarian law. Commanders are under international legal obligation to prevent their members from violating the laws of war and committing crimes against humanity.

In accordance with Security Council resolutions 1315, 1470, and 1478, now is the time for all nations to reinforce their commitments to international peace and security. West Africa will not know true peace until those behind the violence answer for their actions. This office now calls upon the international community to take decisive action to ensure that Taylor is brought to justice.

Mr. FEINGOLD. Mr. President, yesterday the Special Court for Sierra Leone unsealed an indictment of President Charles Taylor of Liberia. Taylor is accused of crimes against humanity, war crimes, and serious violations of international humanitarian law. I commend the Court for taking its mandate seriously and for following the evidence where it led—directly to a sitting head of state.

I have long been a strong supporter of accountability mechanisms in Sierra Leone—both the Special Court and the Truth and Reconciliation that will address the horrible crimes committed by the foot soldiers in the field—soldiers who were, all too often, children. I have worked to ensure that the United States provides appropriate financial support to these mechanisms, and I have raised the importance of our political support at the highest levels. West Africa must break the cycle of violence and impunity, and all of us in the international community have a role to play in that effort.

The Special Court is charged with prosecuting those who bear the greatest responsibility for serious violations of international humanitarian law committed in Sierra Leone since November 1996. For over a decade, Sierra Leone was one of the most insecure places on Earth. Civilians not only suffered from deprivation and displacement, they also had to contend with the forced recruitment of child soldiers, widespread and brutal sexual vio-

lence, and horrifying murders and mutilations. Those responsible for these crimes abandoned all human decency in their simple quest for power and wealth.

The indictment announced yesterday had been sealed for months, but for years there has been no secret about one basic fact—Charles Taylor is a war criminal. I said so years ago, and it remains true today. He should be brought before the Court and held accountable for his actions.

I also strongly support continued American efforts to isolate and pressure the Taylor regime. But at the same time, the situation of the Liberian people cannot be overlooked. Pressuring and condemning Taylor is not a complete policy toward this troubled and volatile country. The armed rebel groups currently fighting for dominance in Liberia have proven all too willing to prey on Liberian civilians in their own lust for power. We must ask ourselves, what will Liberia look like in 10 years, and what will that mean for the Liberian people, for the West African region, and for international criminal networks? What steps can be taken today to influence that outcome? And then we must muster the will and the means to act before the trend most recently exemplified by crisis in Cote d'Ivoire dominates the region.

OKLAHOMA LOSS IN OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM

Mr. NICKLES. Mr. President, over the past few months, we've seen the fall of Saddam Hussein's brutal regime coupled with the dawning of a new day for the Iraqi people.

With major military combat operations in Iraq over and the security of our homeland bolstered, America and her allies are turning our efforts toward helping the Iraqi people build a free society.

Like many Americans, I was thrilled and heartened by the dramatic images of U.S. troops helping Iraqi citizens tear down statues and paintings of Saddam Hussein. The Iraqi people needed our help, our tanks, our troops, and our commitment to topple Saddam Hussein.

For the first time in their lives, many Iraqis are tasting freedom, and like people everywhere, they think it's wonderful. I'm proud of our military and America's commitment to make the people of the Middle East more free and secure.

Our military men and women surely face more difficult days in Iraq, and the Iraqi people will be tested by the responsibilities that come with freedom. The thugs who propped up the previous regime and outside forces with goals of their own will seek to cause problems, stir up trouble and initiate violence. Freedom is messy—nowhere more so than in a country that has just shaken off a brutal dictatorship.