

service, and so have the threats confronting our nation. That's why we must employ all the means of American influence and power, including strong and effective foreign aid. We're confident the return on that investment is an essential contribution to our national security.

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#### RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN COLOMBIA

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, as negotiations continue in Havana between the Colombian Government and the FARC rebels, I want to speak briefly about some recent information that is reason to be both encouraged and cautious about the future.

Over the course of the 50-year armed conflict, antipersonnel landmines and other unexploded ordnance have maimed and killed thousands of Colombians, mostly innocent civilians living in rural areas. To its great credit, the Colombian Government signed the international treaty banning antipersonnel mines years ago, but the FARC continued to use them.

Then, a little over 2 weeks ago, on March 7, the Colombian Government and the FARC reached an agreement for the removal and destruction of these indiscriminate weapons. The two sides have agreed to request the organization Norwegian People's Aid to lead and coordinate the implementation of this effort, which will prioritize areas where the population faces the greatest risk. The agreement provides for surveys, verification, and other mechanisms to ensure its effective implementation. This is long overdue, and I commend both sides for taking this step. It will not only save lives; it will help to build confidence for the implementation of a comprehensive peace agreement if one is reached.

While officials of both Colombia and the United States like to portray Plan Colombia, the 5-year initiative that has stretched on for 15 years and cost more than \$9 billion in U.S. aid as an unparalleled success, the reality is mixed.

On the one hand, there have been significant achievements. Many Colombians are safer today than a decade ago, the army and police are more professional, and the economy has improved significantly. The negotiations to achieve a comprehensive peace agreement between the government and the FARC, for which President Santos deserves our strong support, are making progress, although difficult issues, particularly relating to justice and accountability, remain.

A separate but related issue that needs to be addressed is the Ministry of

Defense's proposed military justice reforms. I am among those, including the Department of State, who have expressed concern that these legislative and constitutional proposals could be interpreted to permit the transfer of certain human rights crimes, including false positives, to the military courts which lack the credibility or capacity to impartially investigate and adjudicate them. The Colombian Government needs to resolve this matter as soon as possible in a manner that eliminates any ambiguity about the authority of the civilian courts over such cases.

Despite Plan Colombia's achievements, much of the past decade and a half was plagued by massacres, kidnappings, land seizures, and other crimes by paramilitaries, the Colombian army, and the FARC and ELN rebels, for which a very small fraction of the individuals responsible have been brought to justice. Corruption was rampant during the administration of President Uribe, and life today for millions of Colombians remains one of poverty, violence, and displacement. Human rights defenders, social activists, and trade unionists continue to be threatened and assaulted or killed with alarming frequency.

According to a recent report of the International Red Cross, violations of international humanitarian law in Colombia increased by 41 percent in 2014. There were 814 alleged breaches of international humanitarian law, an increase of 258 from 2013.

During the past year, Human Rights Watch released reports documenting numerous new cases of disappearances, killings, sexual violence, and other atrocities by the FARC and successor groups to paramilitaries in the mostly Afro-Colombian areas of Tumaco and Buenaventura. In these two municipalities on the Pacific coast, more than 28,000 residents were reportedly forced to abandon their homes due to violence in 2014 alone, according to government data.

These findings illustrate that despite progress in the peace talks they have yet to bring tangible improvements in the lives of many Colombians who continue to suffer horrific abuses with impunity. The landmine agreement has the potential to help change that. And, of course, a peace agreement that results in the disarmament of the FARC and their renunciation of drug trafficking would be a historic achievement of immense benefit to the Colombian people. But while it would signify an end to the armed conflict it would only be the starting point for rebuilding the country, especially rural communities that suffered the worst of the violence and displacement. That is a process which will take years.

It is widely understood that any peace agreement between two warring parties, neither of which can win on the battlefield, requires compromise. At the same time, lasting peace will require access to justice, particularly for

victims of the worst crimes. Impunity is at the root of the Colombian conflict: few criminal investigations result in convictions, and human rights or other political crimes of violence and corruption are rarely prosecuted.

If a peace agreement is reached I believe the United States should strongly support it—with an emphasis on strengthening Colombia's weak judicial institutions, including holding accountable those responsible for war crimes. No democracy can survive without transparent, competent, independent judicial institutions that protect the rule of law and deliver justice when basic rights are violated. If Colombia has the trained investigators, prosecutors, judges and most importantly, the political will to end impunity, the country will finally be able to leave the worst of its past behind.

#### WILDFIRES

Mr. MCCAIN. Mr. President, I would like to briefly mention the topic of wildfires. This year, Arizona and the West face an active wildfire season. Already 20 percent of Arizona's pine forests have been consumed by wildfires over the past decade. The fire situation is made worse by the ongoing drought and the unhealthy state of our overgrown forests. That is why I want to commend the chairman for reporting a budget resolution that calls on Congress to address funding shortfalls in the Forest Service's suppression budget but also promotes wildfire prevention using industry-led forest thinning and forest stewardship contracts.

Senator FLAKE, Senator BARRASSO, myself, and many others have made the case for years that the best way to control ballooning wildfire costs is to thin our forests so that fires become less severe and less costly to fight. The budget resolution's existing provision on wildfires is largely based on a bill that we recently reintroduced in Congress, the FLAME Act Amendments of 2015, which the Budget chairman supported. I am pleased that our goals are reflected in this resolution under section 319.

I also want to commend my colleague, Senator WYDEN, who offered an amendment, S.A. 434, that focuses purely on suppression funding, which I agree should be paired with the wildfire language in the budget resolution. Senator WYDEN and I have talked about merging some elements of our two proposals in order to cover both suppression and prevention. Our mutual goals were advanced today when Senator WYDEN modified his amendment to state that Congress may incorporate additional criteria in any proposal that enables limited wildfire adjustments for the Disaster Relief Fund.

#### SUNSHINE WEEK AND GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY

Mr. GRASSLEY. Mr. President, last week marked the 10th anniversary of