

in support of Israel. As world leaders gather in New York City for the General Assembly, the world must know that Americans and all people who value freedom and the rights and dignity of human beings around the world stand with Israel as it defends itself against unwarranted, unprovoked attacks from terrorists and their state sponsors.

It is essential for those of us who care deeply about what is happening in Israel now to recognize that Israel's struggle is a struggle on behalf of a future where people will be able to live in peace and security. The kidnapping of Israeli soldiers that precipitated the conflicts in Lebanon and Gaza have not yet been resolved, and it is essential that Israel's abducted soldiers are returned to Israel unconditionally. I have met with family members of one of the soldiers abducted in Israel near the Lebanese border who spoke eloquently and movingly about the importance of securing the safe return of the captured soldiers. Today I sent a letter to Jacob Kellenberger, president of the International Committee of the Red Cross, asking that he do whatever possible to determine the health and well-being of the three soldiers, to ensure that they have their full rights under the Geneva Conventions, and to do what he can to secure their release.

Israel's right to exist, and exist in safety, must never be put in question, and we must continue to stand up to offensive rhetoric and terrorist violence that threatens Israel's existence. Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a repeated purveyor of offensive rhetoric, is currently visiting New York for the United Nations General Assembly. It is my hope that world leaders will convey the message that through his statements calling for Israel's destruction and support for the terrorists who rain rockets on Israeli civilians and abduct its soldiers, President Ahmadinejad continues to lessen his standing as a credible world leader in the community of nations.

ARMENIAN INDEPENDENCE

Mrs. BOXER. Mr. President, I take this opportunity to recognize and celebrate the important milestone of the 15th anniversary of Armenian independence.

Armenia has a rich history which spans more than 3000 years. Considered one of the cradles of civilization, Armenia was the first country in the world to officially adopt Christianity as its religion. The Armenian alphabet and language have helped ensure the continuation of a vibrant Armenian culture, despite great odds and numerous attempts to destroy the Armenian nation and the Armenian people.

I was honored to witness the resiliency, courage, and spirit of the Armenian people when I visited Armenia as a Member of Congress in 1991, in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake. During that trip, my commit-

ment to recognizing the Armenian genocide was further strengthened.

In 1915, the Ottoman Turks attempted to annihilate the Armenian people in a brutal genocide. To this day, the Turkish Government refuses to acknowledge the atrocities for what they were—a systematic genocide. Not only were the Armenian people able to survive the genocide, but they kept their small nation alive. It was a great victory when the first Republic of Armenia was formed in 1918 following the Armenian genocide. But again, Armenia faced dissolution when it was taken over by the Soviet Union in 1920; the short-lived independence of Armenia ended when it became a Soviet Republic in the USSR.

Again, the Armenian people persevered despite their loss of independence and despite more devastation. In 1988, disaster hit when an earthquake rocked Armenia, killing approximately 50,000 people and leaving more than half a million people homeless.

Then, on September 23, 1991, Armenia declared its independence from the Soviet Union and formed the second Republic of Armenia. This was a rebirth of the independent state of Armenia and an historic moment for an oppressed country. It was a cause for celebration for Armenians around the world.

I am proud that the United States helped the newly independent Armenian nation during its transition to democracy. In December, 1991, the United States formally recognized the independence of Armenia, and the two countries established diplomatic relations with embassies in each country in January 1992.

But more remains to be done. This 15th anniversary offers an opportunity to celebrate the United States' relationship with Armenia and to renew our commitment to this country and our calls for Armenian genocide recognition.

Following September 11, 2001, Armenia was one of the first countries to respond with assistance to the United States. Armenia provided embassy protection and clearance for U.S. flight, shared intelligence, and froze bank accounts. The U.S. friendship with Armenia remains critical in our fight against terrorism. The United States must never forget Armenia's help and must do all it can to help this independent, democratic nation prosper.

On this milestone 15th anniversary, I am honored to recognize Armenian independence. I pledge to do all I can to assist Armenia and my Armenian-American constituents in California.

WELCOMING KAZAKHSTAN PRESIDENT NURSULTAN NAZARBAYEV

Ms. LANDRIEU. Mr. President, next week the United States will welcome President Nursultan Nazarbayev, the leader of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Fifteen years ago 15 independent states were formed after the collapse of the

Soviet Union. The international community has followed the aftermath of these events in that part of the world with great interest.

Kazakhstan has demonstrated important economic gains during this period. The reforms which have been carried out thus far have allowed it to become one of the world's rapidly developing economies with an annual growth of 9–10 percent. Additionally, it has become the place for common ground among its various ethnic and spiritual groups.

As ethnic and religious conflicts divide regions around the world, Kazakhstan is working to preserve broad interfaith tolerance by creating the Congress of World and Traditional Religions. This program unites a predominantly Muslim country with more than 40 other faiths and fosters a dialog which assists in overcoming religious differences.

One cannot overlook Kazakhstan's contribution to nonproliferation and promotion of global security. Kazakhstan had the world's fourth largest nuclear arsenal, and renounced this lethal heritage without any pressure or coercion.

Independent Kazakhstan is a young nation, yet it has shown tremendous progress and occupies a worthy place in the international community. President Nursultan Nazarbayev has made significant contributions to the establishment of strong and friendly relations with the United States.

After the tragic events on September 11, 2001, Kazakhstan extended its generosity to the people of the United States and after Hurricane Katrina it offered its generous support to the people of Louisiana.

Today our countries enjoy a solid foundation for the continued flourishing of a partnership along the entire spectrum of bilateral relations. Kazakhstan is a dependable partner of the United States in the global war on terrorism. I am confident the upcoming visit of President Nazarbayev to the United States will deepen and strengthen the strategic partnership between our two countries.

NORTHERN MARIANA ISLANDS

Mr. BINGAMAN. Mr. President, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, CNMI, became a part of the United States 30 years ago with high expectations, but today they are an American community in deep distress. The CNMI economy is being bled by a rapid decline in its garment industry as the result of new international trade rules, by losses in its tourism industry, and by the loss of over \$100 million each year in wages that are sent offshore by foreign guest workers. The community on Saipan, where 90 percent of the population resides is experiencing increasing problems with water quality and service, the electric system has returned to scheduled outages after years of reliable service, and overburdened wastewater systems cause regular contamination of the land, air,