

to act, and we reported out legislation that would punish criminals who traffic in firearms and would close background check loopholes. This included my bipartisan legislation to prevent criminals from using straw purchasers who exploit weak background check laws in order to funnel firearms to criminals. Our efforts were strongly supported by the American public, but Senate Republicans blocked these commonsense reforms on the Senate floor.

It has been more than 3 months since Democratic members of the Judiciary Committee called for a hearing in the wake of the tragedy in Charleston, SC. I hope the majority will soon schedule this hearing so that we can have a constructive discussion on gun violence that has shaken too many communities and too many families. But if we truly want to make a difference, we must work together to build consensus around solutions to gun violence. I will work with anyone interested in preventing these tragedies, and I will soon reintroduce my legislation to strengthen our straw purchasing and firearm trafficking laws.

Like many Vermonters, I grew up with firearms, and I have enormous respect for the freedoms the Second Amendment protects. None of the concepts put forward by the Democratic caucus threaten the Second Amendment rights of lawful gun owners. But American lives are threatened when our laws do not protect them. This need not be a partisan issue, and we must work together.

Our country desperately needs meaningful reform now. The toll that gun violence takes on our communities is too great. It is past time for Congress to act. The American people should not have to wait until the next tragedy.

JUSTICE FOR WAR CRIMES IN SRI LANKA

Mr. LEAHY. Mr. President, earlier this week the distinguished ranking member of the Foreign Relations Committee, Senator CARDIN, spoke about the opportunity for the United States and Sri Lanka to expand economic and security cooperation and the need for accountability for war crimes and reconciliation between ethnic and religious factions in that country. I want to join him in expressing support for the aspirations of the Sri Lankan people for reconciliation, justice, and equitable economic development.

Last week the United Nations Human Rights Council adopted a resolution which, if faithfully implemented, could be the basis for a meaningful and long overdue international role in Sri Lanka to hold accountable those involved in war crimes and crimes against humanity during that country's brutal civil war.

After so many false starts, so many investigations and reports that documented widespread atrocities by both sides in the conflict, including rape, arbitrary detention, torture, the use of

child soldiers, summary executions, shelling of civilians, and forced disappearances were ignored; and after recommendations to bring those responsible to justice were ignored, the U.N. resolution affirms that the Sri Lankan Government needs to put in place a judicial mechanism with international participation.

The resolution refers to the recent report by the U.N. Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, which documented horrific abuses by the Sri Lankan Armed Forces and LTTE rebels and the government's failure over decades to punish those responsible. Among the report's key recommendations is the establishment of a special court "integrating international judges, prosecutors, lawyers and investigators" with an independent Sri Lankan investigative and prosecuting body. No other mechanism would have the credibility and independence to deliver real justice.

Let me repeat that because it is so important: No other mechanism would have the credibility and independence to deliver real justice. The refusal of past Sri Lankan Governments to accept this premise and to recognize that no one, including the armed forces, is above the law, is why so far no one has been held accountable.

To its credit, President Maithrapala Sirisena's government cosponsored the resolution, which was presented initially to the U.N. Human Rights Council by the United States, United Kingdom, Montenegro, and Macedonia. The resolution, regarding a "credible judicial process," "affirms the importance of participation in a Sri Lankan judicial mechanism, including the Special Counsel's office, of Commonwealth and other foreign judges, defense lawyers, and authorized prosecutors and investigators." Having cosponsored the resolution, the government should establish without delay a special tribunal that brings together international investigators, prosecutors, and judges with Sri Lankan counterparts who are protected from outside pressure and intimidation, as well as a program to protect witnesses. The United States could provide assistance for such an effort.

The government will also need to ensure that violations of international law, including war crimes, disappearances, torture, and the concept of command responsibility, are incorporated into Sri Lankan law, so that charges brought reflect the severity of the crimes and target those most responsible.

I have spoken previously about President Sirisena's initial accomplishments, including the adoption of the 19th Amendment to the constitution, which curtails the extensive powers enjoyed by the Executive and vests more power in the parliament, limits the Presidential term to 5 years instead of 6, and allows the President to hold office only for two terms instead of an unlimited number of terms.

Unlike the previous government, which persecuted its critics and locked up after sham trials journalists who exposed corruption, President Sirisena has taken steps to reaffirm freedom of the press. Under the previous government, Sri Lanka's judicial system was politicized and corrupted. The new government is taking steps to reestablish the independence of the judiciary, which is fundamental to any democracy. And, as has been reported, the Government of Sri Lanka has accepted many recommendations to improve the human rights situation, including a repeal of the draconian Prevention of Terrorism Act and reforms to the Witness and Victim Protection Law, both long called for by victims' rights groups. The government has agreed to accelerate the return of lands confiscated by the security forces; to end the military's involvement in civilian activities in the country's north and east; to investigate allegations of attacks on civil society, the media, and religious minorities; and to work toward devolution of authority from Colombo, consistent with the 13th amendment to the constitution.

President Sirisena has sought to erase the worst excesses and abuses of his predecessor and put his country on a path to reconciliation and prosperity. For this he deserves our support. The sooner the government makes good on these commitments, the better, as the Sri Lankan people have waited a very long time for a government that is serious about reconciliation, which means addressing the ethnic, religious, social, economic, and political divisions and inequalities that were at the root of the conflict.

The U.N. resolution is far from perfect. It has been pointed out that it lacks adequate provisions for international oversight of implementation of its terms. The resolution only calls for an oral update from the High Commissioner in June 2016 and a written implementation report in March 2017. The United States should not wait until next June to report to Congress on the government's progress in complying with the terms of the resolution. Despite its shortcomings, the U.N. resolution points the way forward. A great deal of work lies ahead. More than 6 years have passed since the war ended. Physical evidence has been lost or destroyed, people's memories fade, and witnesses die. But the Sri Lankan people, and particularly those who suffered grievous losses in the war, should take solace from the fact that the international community has not forgotten them and that their own government may be ready to take the necessary steps to restore accountability and the rule of law to Sri Lanka.

PALESTINIAN TERRORISM

Mr. CRUZ. Mr. President, my thoughts and prayers are with the Israeli people who are enduring a new escalation of Palestinian terrorism.