Mr. LANTOS. Mr. Speaker, today President Bill Clinton is in Bulgaria for the first visit by a President of the United States to this important Balkan country. One of the principal purposes of President Clinton's trip to Bulgaria is to recognize and acknowledge the contribution Bulgaria made to NATO during the conflict in Yugoslavia. Bulgaria permitted NATO aircraft to overfly its territory during the air campaign against Serbia, and Bulgaria has suffered substantial economic losses as a result of economic sanctions against Yugoslavia (Serbia). An expression of the gratitude of the United States is most appropriate.

In addition to Bulgaria's cooperation in the conflict with Yugoslavia, Mr. Speaker, Bulgaria has contributed to regional peacekeeping and security. It maintains constructive relations with all of its neighbors, and it is host to the Southeastern Europe Multinational Peacekeeping Force, which comprises personnel from eight countries in the region. Bulgaria was the first country to recognize the sovereignty of neighboring Macedonia, setting an example of how countries in the Balkans can respect internationally-recognized borders and governments. Bulgaria has expressed its desire to become a member of NATO, and as Bulgaria continues to progress economically and politically Mr. Speaker, what President Clinton is seeing in Bulgaria is a country that is very different than the image most Americans have of the Balkans—and a country that is a stark contrast to its western neighbor, Yugoslavia.

Over the past decade since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of Soviet domination of Central and Eastern Europe, Bulgaria has been transformed from a Soviet satellite into a functioning democracy. Several peaceful and competitive elections have been held—the most recent just two weeks ago. The current government of Prime Minister Ivan Kostov is an example of what can be done. After communism's collapse, however, relations between Turks and Bulgarians improved dramatically. Bulgaria's pragmatic President, Petar Stoyanov, publicly apologized for his country's behavior toward its ethnic Turks at the time when the country was under communist rule. Turkey and Bulgaria have signed a series of agreements on free trade, cross-border investment, customs tariffs and even military cooperation.

Mr. Speaker, in addition, Bulgarian Orthodox and Muslim religious leaders often work together, and in some communities churches and mosques are found in the same neighborhood. The two governments have initiated a program to return property and Turkish families separated by past conflicts. Bulgaria provided emergency relief in the wake of recent earthquakes that devastated Turkey. These initiatives have helped heal the wounds of the past.

Mr. Speaker, at the core of Bulgaria's efforts to promote tolerance has been political inclusion and education. In October 1990, Bulgaria's first post-communist government included a Turkish party that won ten percent of the total seats in Parliament. In the area of education, Bulgarian school texts have been revised to include a more accurate history of Bulgarian-Turkish relations. School teachers from the country's Turkish regions are sent to Turkey to better learn how to teach the Turkish language.

As Europe, the United States and the international community go about the task of rebuilding Southeastern Europe in the wake of the war in Kosovo, we should look to the example of Bulgaria as a society where ethnic and religious groups are peacefully co-existing, and where tolerance is ingrained in the country's culture and history.

Mr. Speaker, the high-profile visit of President Clinton to Bulgaria calls attention to Bulgaria's fine record in this regard. Even among the multi-ethnic and multi-religious complexity so characteristic of the Balkans, which has led to so much human suffering and armed conflict in that region, people of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds can live and work together peacefully and successfully. The Bulgarian people have shown that this can be done.