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NO REPEAL OF SECTION 907 WHILE AZERBAIJAN ILLEGALLY BLOCKADES ARMENIA AND NAGORNO KARABAGH

The SPEAKER pro tempore (Mr. MILLER of Florida). Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. PALLONE) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. PALLONE. Mr. Speaker, late last month Secretary of State Madeleine Albright renewed the administration's unfortunate and misguided effort to repeal Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act. Section 907 restricts direct U.S. Government assistance to the Government of Azerbaijan until the President certifies that Azerbaijan has taken demonstrable steps to lift its blockades of Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh. Azerbaijan's illegal blockades of its neighbors has resulted in the disruption of supplies of vital goods to Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh, causing severe economic hardship and real human suffering.

Mr. Speaker, Section 907 was good law when it was passed, and it remains good law 7 years later. Azerbaijan has done nothing to merit the repeal of Section 907, and despite these facts, the administration, with the strong backing of some of the major oil companies, is trying to urge Congress to repeal Section 907.

Mr. Speaker, the Caspian Sea, which Azerbaijan borders on, is believed by some to contain vast oil reserves. The tantalizing prospect of a new source of petroleum resources has caused the administration to look the other way in terms of Azerbaijan's poor human rights record, its corrupt and undemocratic government, and its pattern of regional aggression.

In written testimony submitted to the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, Secretary Albright stated that the administration would renew its request to repeal Section 907. Presumably, the foreign operations bill which we will be debating later this summer would be the vehicle for repealing Section 907, just as was attempted last year. But, Mr. Speaker, I am proud to say that we succeeded in taking that language out of the bill on the House floor. A bipartisan coalition of Members of this House kept Section 907 as the law because it was the right thing to do.

Mr. Speaker, I would say that it would be even more imprudent and unjustified now to repeal Section 907. As I mentioned, Azerbaijan's blockade is against both the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Nagorno Karabagh. With the breakup of the Soviet Union, as the countries of the collapsing em-

pire attained their independence, Azerbaijan attempted to militarily crush Nagorno Karabagh and drive out the Armenian population. But the Karabagh Armenians ultimately won their war of independence, and a ceasefire was signed in 1994.

The U.S. has been one of the countries taking the lead in the peace process under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. Late last year, the U.S. and our negotiating partners put forward a proposal known as the Common State Proposal as a basis for moving the negotiations forward.

Despite some serious reservations, the elected governments of both Nagorno Karabagh and Armenia have accepted this Common State Proposal in a spirit of good faith to get the negotiations moving forward. And what was Azerbaijan's reaction to the proposal from the United States and our negotiating partners? An unqualified no.

Yet, Mr. Speaker, unbelievable as it sounds, our State Department is trying to push Congress to reward Azerbaijan, a country that rejects our peace plan, by repealing Section 907, to the serious detriment of Armenia and Karabagh, the countries that accept our proposal. Furthermore, the administration's budget request actually proposes increasing aid to Azerbaijan and decreasing aid to Armenia. What kind of a message does that send? That rejecting peace is okay?

Current law, Section 907, makes good sense and is morally justified. Section 907 does not prevent the delivery of humanitarian aid to the people Azerbaijan; to date, well over \$130 million in U.S. humanitarian and exchange assistance has been provided to Azerbaijan through NGOs, nongovernmental organizations. The blockade of Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh has cut off the transport of food, fuel, medicine, and other vital supplies, creating a humanitarian crisis requiring the U.S. to send emergency life assistance to Armenia.

The bottom line, Mr. Speaker, is that Azerbaijan has failed to live up to the basic conditions set forth in the U.S. law pursuant to Section 907, and that is: "Taking demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh."

Mr. Speaker, I just hope that Secretary Albright and the State Department will reconsider their plan to repeal Section 907. And if not, Mr. Speaker, I hope that Congress will reject this effort as we have done now for several years.

Mr. Speaker, late last month Secretary of State Madeleine Albright renewed the Administration's unfortunate and misguided effort to repeal Section 907 of the Freedom Support Act.

What is Section 907? And why is it so important? Section 907 restricts direct U.S. gov-

ernment assistance to the government of the Republic of Azerbaijan, until the President certifies that Azerbaijan has taken demonstrable steps to lift its blockades of Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh. Azerbaijan's illegal blockades of its neighbors has resulted in the disruption of supplies of vital goods to Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh, causing severe economic hardship and real human suffering.

When the Freedom Support Act was adopted in 1992, establishing our new, post-Cold War U.S. foreign policy for the newly independent states of the former Soviet Empire, Section 907 was included as a way of holding Azerbaijan accountable for its blockades of its neighbors. Ideally, it might have been hoped that the Section 907 sanctions would prompt Azerbaijan to lift the blockades. But Azerbaijan has stubbornly maintained its counterproductive strategy of trying to strangle Armenia and Karabagh.

Mr. Speaker, Section 907 was good law when it was passed, and it remains good law seven years later. Azerbaijan has done nothing to merit the repeal of Section 907.

Despite these facts, Mr. Speaker, the Administration—with the strong backing of some of the major oil companies—is trying to push Congress to repeal Section 907. You see, the Caspian Sea, which Azerbaijan borders on, is believed by some to contain vast oil reserves. Much of these reserves remain unproven, and recent disappointing test drillings have prompted several international oil consortiums to pull out of Azerbaijan. But the tantalizing prospect of a new source of petroleum resources has caused the Administration to look the other way in terms of Azerbaijan's poor human rights record, its corrupt and undemocratic government, and its pattern of regional aggression.

In written testimony submitted to the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Foreign Operations, Secretary Albright stated that the Administration would renew its request to repeal Section 907. Presumably the Foreign Operations bill, which we will be debating later this summer, would be the vehicle for repealing Section 907—just as was attempted last year. Last September, as we were working to finish up the appropriations bills before adjourning for the Congressional elections, a provision was included in the fiscal year 1999 Foreign Operations bill to repeal Section 907. But I'm proud to say, Mr. Speaker, that we succeeded in taking that language out of the bill on the House floor. A bipartisan coalition of Members of this House kept Section 907 as the law, because it was the right thing to do.

Mr. Speaker, I would say that it would be even more imprudent and unjustified now to repeal Section 907.

As I mentioned, Azerbaijan's blockade is against both the Republic of Armenia and the Republic of Nagorno Karabagh. Nagorno Karabagh is an historically Armenian-populated region of the Caucasus Mountains (known as Artsakh to the Armenian people) that Stalin's map-makers included as part of Azerbaijan—although even in Soviet times its distinctiveness and autonomy were officially recognized. With the break-up of the Soviet Union, as the countries of the collapsing empire attained their independence, Azerbaijan attempted to militarily crush Nagorno

Karabagh and drive out the Armenian population. But the Karabagh Armenians ultimately won their war of independence, and a cease-fire was signed in 1994.

Although the shooting war has essentially ceased—except for occasional sniper fire from Azerbaijan's soldiers against the defenders of Karabagh—a more permanent peace has been elusive. The United States has been one of the countries taking the lead in the peace process, under the auspices of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Late last year, the U.S. and our negotiating partners put forward a proposal, known as the "Common State" proposal, as a basis for moving the negotiations forward.

Despite some serious reservations, the elected governments of both Nagorno Karabagh and Armenia have accepted this Common State proposal in a spirit of good faith, to get the negotiations moving forward. And what was Azerbaijan's reaction to the proposal from the United States and our negotiating partners? An unqualified "no." In other words, Armenia and Karabagh have agreed to work with the U.S. for peace in this strategically vital region of the world. Azerbaijan has rejected American efforts to achieve peace and stability.

Yet, Mr. Speaker, unbelievable as it sounds our State Department is trying to push Congress to reward Azerbaijan, the country that rejects our peace plan, by repealing Section 907—to the serious detriment of Armenia and Karabagh, the countries that accept our proposal. Furthermore, the Administration's budget request actually proposes increasing aid to Azerbaijan and decreasing aid to Armenia. What message does that send? That rejecting peace is okay?

Current law, Section 907, makes good sense and is morally justified. Section 907 does NOT prevent the delivery of humanitarian aid to the people of Azerbaijan; to date, well over \$130 million in U.S. humanitarian and exchange assistance has been provided to Azerbaijan through NGOs (non-governmental organizations). The blockade of Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh has cut off the transport of food, fuel, medicine and other vital supplies—creating a humanitarian crisis requiring the U.S. to send emergency life-saving assistance to Armenia. Armenia is landlocked, and the Soviet-era infrastructure routed 85 percent of Armenia's goods, as well as vital energy supplies, through Azerbaijan. That life-line is now cut off. Despite these disadvantages, Armenia has established democracy and market reforms, and is trying to integrate its economy with the West.

But the bottom line, Mr. Speaker, is that Azerbaijan has failed to live up to the basic condition set forth in U.S. law, pursuant to Section 907: "taking demonstrable steps to cease all blockades and other offensive uses of force against Armenia and Nagorno Karabagh."

I hope that Secretary Albright and the State Department will reconsider their plan to repeal Section 907. If not, I hope Congress will reject this effort, as we have done for years.

H.R. 2116, THE VETERANS' MILLENNIUM HEALTH CARE ACT

The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Florida (Mr. STEARNS) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.

Mr. STEARNS. Mr. Speaker, good morning. Today I want to talk about a bill that I have sponsored, the bill is H.R. 2116, the Veterans' Millennium Health Care Act. I am pleased this is a bipartisan bill. The gentleman from Arizona (Mr. STUMP) on the Republican side and the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. EVANS) on the Democrat side, as well as the gentleman from Illinois (Mr. GUTIERREZ), the ranking member on the subcommittee, have all cosponsored this legislation.

Last week, on June 9, we held a hearing and marked up the legislation, and it was favorably reported out of the full committee.

What this legislation does is offer a blueprint to help position VA for the future, and I think it is appropriately entitled the Veterans' Millennium Health Care Act. Foremost among the VA's challenges are the long-term care of our aging veterans population. For many among the World War II population, long-term care has become just as important as acute care. However the long-term care challenge has gone unanswered for too long.

It is important, therefore, that just last month the VA committee held a hearing on long-term care. The bill I have introduced would precisely address this issue and would adopt some of the key recommendations of the blue ribbon advisory committee. But my bill goes further than that in providing VA important new tools for access to long-term care.

The bill also tackles another challenging issue. Mr. Speaker, the GAO findings showed that the VA spends billions of dollars in the next 5 years to operate unneeded buildings. They testified that one out of every four VA medical care dollars is spent in maintaining buildings rather than caring for patients. A lot of these buildings are over 40 years old. Now, this is just not an abstract concern. This could be a savings of almost \$10 billion a year.

Mr. Speaker, I think it is no secret that the VA administration is talking about closing old, obsolete hospitals. In some locations, that may be appropriate. The point is that the VA has closure authority and has already used it. In fact, we could expect closures of needed facilities under the disastrous budget submitted by the President last year.

Mr. Speaker, my bill instead calls for a process, establishing a new process so that decisions on closing hospitals can only be made on a comprehensive planning basis with veterans' participation. And this is very important and very appropriate. The bill sets numerous

safeguards in place and would specifically provide that VA cannot simply stop operating a hospital and walk away from its responsibilities to veterans. No, it must reinvest the savings in a new, brand new, improved treatment facility or improved services in the area.

The bill responds to pressing veterans' needs. It opens the door to expansion of long-term care, to greater access to outpatient care, and to improve benefits including emergency care coverage. In turn, it provides for reforms that would help advance these goals.

As I mentioned earlier, it is bipartisan, and we have the support of both Democrats and Republicans. I also would like to commend the gentleman from New Jersey (Mr. SMITH) for introducing H.R. 1762. This is legislation that expands the scope of VA respite care. The language in his bill has been incorporated into our bill.

My legislation also requires that the VA provide needed long-term care for 50 percent service-connected veterans and veterans needing care for service-related conditions.

H.R. 2116 would also expand access to care to two very deserving groups. It would specifically authorize priority care for veterans injured in combat and awarded the Purple Heart and provide specific authority for VA care of TRICARE-eligible military retirees not otherwise eligible for priority VA care. In such cases, DOD would reimburse the VA at the same rate payable to the TRICARE contractor.

The measure would also authorize VA to recover reasonable costs of emergency care in community hospitals for VA patients who have no health care.

In other words, this is needed. There is no other more important component in this than this long-term care I have mentioned earlier. But I think there is another segment that we are forgetting about, and that is the homeless veterans. This bill addresses that by awarding grants for building and remodeling State veterans' homes and providing grants for the homeless veterans.

To summarize, Mr. Speaker, this bill, H.R. 2116, provides new direction to address veterans' long-term care needs; expands veterans' access to care; closes gaps in eligibility laws; and establishes needed reform to improve the VA health care system. Our veterans population is in need of this reform.

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The SPEAKER pro tempore. Under the Speaker's announced policy of January 19, 1999, the gentleman from Texas (Mr. DOGGETT) is recognized during morning hour debates for 5 minutes.