Madam President, I rise today to discuss a small, but

critical program that represents a test for this body and for this

country: The Iraq Special Immigrant Visa program. It is a test of

whether we stand behind our commitments abroad. It is a test of whether

we help those who help us. And for others out there who might consider

assisting the U.S., it is a test to see if we follow through on our

promises. If we don't act now, the Iraqi Special Immigrant Visa program

will expire along with our obligation to thousands of Iraqis who risked

their lives to help U.S. troops at war.

The latest version of the Iraq Special Immigrant Visa program was

initiated by Congress in the fiscal year 2008 National Defense

Authorization Act. It was originally designed to allow for certain

foreign nationals in Iraq who served alongside U.S. forces to receive

special visas to come live and work in the United States. The visa

program was created to help secure a path out of harm's way for those

Iraqis and their families that provided important skills to Americans,

like translation services, and are now targeted because of their

affiliation with us.

The Iraq visa program is currently set to expire today on September

30, 2013. Without action by the Congress to extend this program,

thousands of Iraqi applicants, already under threat due to their

faithful assistance and valuable service to the U.S. Government, will

see consular work on their cases stopped and their dream of escaping

the daily threat of violence will be suspended.

Even if we eventually decide to reauthorize the program at a later

date, the stoppage will result in delays of months or even years for

these applicants as they completely restart an already long and overly

arduous process. Many of these interpreters and assistants who risked

their lives for Americans are now in hiding running from place to place

to escape retribution attacks against them and their families, any

delays could mean their lives.

Now, since I started working on this special immigrant visa issue, I

have come across countless stories of bravery demonstrated by Iraqi

interpreters who stand shoulder to shoulder fighting with our military

men and women. My office has also heard directly from retired military

officers who served alongside these Iraqis and are now fighting to get

them out of Iraq to the safety of the United States. I would like to

just briefly read a few excerpts from these tremendously inspiring

stories:

From one retired Marine Corps captain:

From a Marine Corps infantry officer who did two tours in Iraq:

From that same marine:

I could not agree more. But, unfortunately, thousands of Iraqis who

have earned the chance to come to the United States might not make it,

and simply because we failed to act. That is unacceptable.

Now, a number of Members on both sides of the aisle, including

myself, have been working hard for the last 6 months to find a way to

extend this critical program. Senators McCain, Leahy, Graham, Levin,

Durbin, and others have been champions of this effort. We have

extensions of this program in the comprehensive immigration bill, the

current version of the National Defense Authorization Act, and in the

annual State Department appropriations bill. Unfortunately, none of

these will be signed into law by the deadline.

I was hoping that the House of Representatives would include an

extension in their original continuing resolution legislation, but,

unfortunately, they did not, leaving the Senate with few procedural

opportunities to include it. However, we may have a second chance here

in the hours ahead, and I would urge my colleagues in the House and

Senate to find a way to extend this program.

Now, there is no doubt that the administration needs to do more to

actually process the visa applications. The stories we are hearing

about the backlog are entirely inexcusable. Applicants ought to be able

to cut through the redtape and bureaucratic nightmare to get their

visas processed quickly and more efficiently, while still ensuring

proper vetting and background checks. However, we have no hopes of

improving the program if we don't extend it.

We have a responsibility to fulfill our obligation to the thousands

of civilians who risked their lives to help our country during a time

of war. The contributions that Iraqi and Afghan civilians made to our

military efforts have been tremendous. Those who served as translators

were an invaluable resource and ally to our men and women in uniform.

We can't turn our back on them now, particularly as terrorist

organizations target these civilians for retribution. We made a promise

to Iraqi civilians and now we must honor it.