

May 21, 2007

**Senator Richard G. Lugar
Committee on Foreign Relations**

I congratulate the Georgian Association in the United States on its 75th anniversary. Your organization was founded by brave Georgians who escaped repression to seek freedom and opportunity in this country. During those 75 years, the Association has never wavered in its support for an independent, democratic, and prosperous Georgia. Challenges remain for Georgia, but your important work has made a difference and it will continue to do so.

The Georgian people's commitment to democratic principles was symbolized in November 2003 when they protested fraudulent elections and demanded a fair electoral process. The Rose Revolution ushered in a new era of leadership and advanced democratic institutions, human rights, and free-market principles.

We are also here to celebrate Georgia's Independence Day. Georgia is a special ally of the United States. It has overcome great odds to emerge as a leader in the Caucasus and a role model for the region and beyond. This holiday holds special significance as Georgia works to resolve the situation surrounding Abkhazia and South Ossetia. I am pleased that the United States remains steadfast in our support of Georgia's territorial integrity.

As a friend of Georgia, I have offered legislation this year in two important areas. First, I authored a bill endorsing Georgian membership in NATO. It passed both houses of Congress and was signed into law by President Bush. My bill - *the NATO Freedom Consolidation Act* - authorizes security assistance for Georgia, as well as Albania, Croatia, Macedonia, and Ukraine. This assistance is intended to help these nations meet NATO membership requirements.

I am not alone in supporting Georgian membership in NATO. On July 5, 2006, President Bush, in a meeting with President Saakashvili, states: "I believe that NATO would benefit with Georgia being a member... and I think Georgia would benefit." I could not agree more.

NATO is moving in the right direction. Two months ago, the NATO Secretary General announced that the Alliance had launched an Intensified Dialogue with Georgia. While this is an important step, NATO must grant a Membership Action Plan as soon as possible and the United States must continue to champion Georgia's NATO aspirations.

I also have offered Senate Resolution 33 stating that the United States should commence negotiations with Georgia on a free trade agreement. Such an agreement would complement the bilateral investment treaty concluded in 1994 and Georgia's accession to the World Trade Organization in 2000. Tbilisi has continued to maintain its commitment to an open economy and adherence to free trade principles. The U.S. is one of Georgia's largest trading partners and the commercial relationship holds important opportunities for both countries. I am hopeful that the Senate will pass this important message of support.

During my most recent visit to Georgia last August, I was impressed to see the important work underway to address threats from weapons stockpiles left over from the Soviet era. Large amounts of biological pathogens, shoulder-launched missiles, and conventional arms pose a threat to the people of Georgia and the international community. Through the Nunn-Lugar Program our countries are cooperating to provide safe and secure storage for numerous pathogens and disease strains. In addition, American and Georgian scientists are conducting joint research to find

treatments for biological threats. Equally important, we are establishing a joint disease detection and surveillance system to detect biological attacks and natural disease outbreaks.

Legislation I authored with Senator Barak Obama is ensuring that the United States is assisting Georgia in protecting and eliminating Soviet-era *conventional* weaponry. I have visited sites in Georgia where mountains of surplus automatic firearms, ammunition, and mortar rounds await destruction.

I am confident that we will celebrate many more Georgian successes in the years to come. It is a great honor to be here tonight, and I look forward to working with each of you to make the aspirations and dreams of the Georgian people a reality.

Thank you very much.