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Hon. Steve Israel

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Mr. ISRAEL. Mr. Speaker, I rise today to introduce a bill that will correct a glaring vulnerability in our homeland defense. The ``Commercial Airline Missile Defense Act'' will fully fund the addition of electronic surface-to-air missile defense systems on all commercially scheduled flights on United States aircrafts.

Protecting American lives is the most fundamental job of the Federal Government. We must therefore eliminate every weakness that we see in our country's homeland defense. The vulnerability of our commercial air fleet to terrorist missile attack is not a hysterical hypothetical. It is a real and present danger.

Last November there was attempted missile attack on an Israeli airliner taking off from an airport in Kenya. Two surface-to-air missiles, also known SAMs, which can bring down large airplanes--commercial as well as military--from up to 30 miles from an airport were launched against an Israeli chartered jet airliner. It was only profound good luck--likely a flawed missile batch--that saved the plane and its hundreds of innocent passengers. Thankfully, last November's attack on the Israeli jetliner failed. We need to keep in mind, however, that the missile used in the Israeli attack one of the least sophisticated of the several types of SAMs that exist in the world today. It was a Soviet-era SA7, which was been sold globally since the end of the cold war. The other types of SAMs are much more advanced and much more effective.

SAMs were designed to be highly portable and are easily disassembled. As such, they are relatively easy to transport and smuggle. Terrorist could launch this five-foot long missile from near an airport and flee before anyone can detect them. Airplanes taking off with full and highly combustible fuel tanks are the most likely and deadly targets. The U.S. government must equip all its aircrafts with a defense system to protect and defend against this threat.

The United States provided Stingers--a type of SAM--to the Mujahadeen in the 1980s in Afghanistan. They were used with devastating affect against the Soviets. The Mujahadeen, who subsequently splintered into the Taliban and Al Qaeda, possessed at least a thousand Stingers that were never accounted for after the war ended in 1989. Soviet shoulder armed missiles, like the ones used in Kenya against the Israeli jetliner, are even far more abundant.

Tens of thousands of these missiles are out there. Although most are in state arsenals, thousands--including U.S. Stingers and Russian SA7s--are unaccounted for and feared to be in the hands of terrorists.

Few doubt that Al Qaeda does not possess large quantities of Russian SA7s and even more effective U.S. Stingers. A successful attack against a Boeing 747-400 with full capacity could cost almost five hundred lives. Aside from large-scale casualties, such a successful attack would have a devastating impact on the U.S. Aircraft industry, on travel and tourism, and on the entire economy. It would be a multifaceted catastrophe.

Now that we understand that pleas are vulnerable, the United States Government must take every step to protect and defend American citizens. The advanced technology needed to protect American commercial airplanes exists and is operation on U.S. military transports. The new system are advanced and are much more successful than the previous system of diversionary flares. The most modern systems, such as those installed on U.S. C17s and C5As, identify when a plane is threatened, detect the source of the threat, jam the guidance system of the incoming missiles and steer it off its flight path. Similar systems are currently used on low-altitude military aircrafts.

The rapid deployment of this system is essential for the safety of U.S. commercial flyers and is the clear responsibility of the U.S. Government to implement. I propose fully funding the retrofitting of SAM defensive systems and beginning that process this year.

No one in this body would question that preserving and protecting the people of the United States is our most important and sacred constitutional responsibility. At this critical time in our Nation's history we have two simultaneous crises and concerns: national security and economic security. The bill I introduce today addresses both of these issues. This legislation would take the preventive step of reducing risk to millions of travelers and create thousands of jobs through the retrofitting of the defensive technologies.

Additionally, this bill will boost our airline industry. Recent surveys have shown that between one-fifth to one-third of Americans are restricting their flying because of fears of terrorism. Our government and the airline industry are working closely together to restore full consumer confidence in the safety of our commercial air system. Implementing a robust and effective defense system for our commercial jet fleet would further accelerate the process of making Americans feel safer when they fly, and help the economic recovery of U.S. air carriers. The estimated cost of $10.2 billion for a system of 6,800 commercial jets at a unit price of $1.5 million will be offset by these economic benefits. The unit cost could drop even lower in mass production.

Mr. Speaker, I fully realize that a ten billion expenditure is significant. But it is not prohibitive. The only thing that would be prohibitive would be for this Congress to be negligent in our responsibility to protect the people of our great Nation. Let us not gather together in grief the morning after a catastrophe and wonder what we could have done to prevent it. We know what can be done. Let's do it.