

## **Leahy And Lofgren Lead Bicameral Introduction Of Refugee Protection Act**

WASHINGTON (Thursday, March 21, 2013) – Senate Judiciary Committee Chairman Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.) and Rep. Zoe Lofgren (D-Calif.) introduced companion legislation in the Senate and House of Representatives Thursday that would improve the Nation’s immigration laws to ensure the longstanding American tradition of protecting refugees and asylum seekers fleeing persecution in their home countries.

The Refugee Protection Act responds to shortfalls in current immigration law by repealing some of the most harsh, inefficient and unnecessary hurdles facing refugees and asylum seekers. The bill, which mirrors legislation Leahy and Lofgren have advanced previously in recent years, reaffirms the commitments made in ratifying the 1951 Refugee Convention, and will help to restore the United States to its rightful role as a safe and welcoming home for those suffering from persecution around the world. The Senate bill is cosponsored by Senators Carl Levin (D-Mich.), Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.), and Mazie Hirono (D-Hawaii). The House bill is cosponsored by Reps. John Conyers (D-Mich.), Keith Ellison (D-Minn.), Jared Polis (D-Colo.), Jan Schakowsky (D-Ill.), Eric Swalwell (D-Calif.), and Peter Welch (D-Vt.).

“The Senate will soon turn to comprehensive immigration reform and the changes to the refugee system contained in this bill are a critical component of fixing our broken immigration system,” said Leahy, who noted that Vermont has welcomed many refugees and asylum seekers. “As we address the many complex issues that face our immigration system, we must ensure that America upholds its longstanding commitment to refugee protection.”

Lofgren said: “Americans have long been a compassionate people, offering a safe harbor to victims of devastating calamities and survivors of tortuous, brutal regimes. The legislation we’re introducing today not only continues that proud tradition, it makes several needed improvements to ensure we can help those seeking freedom from persecution and oppression abroad.”

The Refugee Protection Act will improve protections for refugees and asylum seekers, and make important reforms to the expedited removal process for asylum seekers pursuing their claims before the Asylum Office of the Department of Homeland Security. The legislation requires the immigration detention system to adhere to basic humane treatment for asylum seekers and others with access to counsel, religious practice, and visits from family. The bill also strengthens the law so those with actual ties to terrorist activities will continue to be denied entry to the United States, and it protects innocent asylum seekers and refugees from being unfairly denied protection as a result of overly broad terrorism bars that, over time, have inadvertently had the effect of sweeping in those who were actually victimized by terrorists.

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**Statement Of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),  
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee,  
On The Introduction Of The Refugee Protection Act Of 2013  
March 21, 2013**

Today, I am pleased to reintroduce the Refugee Protection Act. The Senate will soon turn to comprehensive immigration reform and the changes to the refugee system contained in this bill are a critical component of fixing our broken immigration system. As we address the many complex immigration issues facing our country, we must ensure that America upholds its longstanding commitment to refugee protection.

The Refugee Protection Act of 2013 reaffirms the commitments we made in ratifying the 1951 Refugee Convention, and will help to restore the United States as a global leader on human rights. This legislation seeks to repeal the most harsh, inefficient, and unnecessary elements of current law, and restore the United States to its rightful role as a safe and welcoming home for those suffering from persecution around the world.

During this challenging economic time, it can be tempting to look inward rather than to fulfill our global humanitarian commitments. I believe this bill is needed more now than ever. Millions of refugees remain displaced and warehoused in refugee camps in Eastern Africa, Southeast Asia, and other parts of the world. Ongoing political struggles in the Middle East and North Africa are causing dislocation of significant populations. We will continue to see genuine refugees who are in dire need of protection. The Refugee Protection Act helps ensure that America will continue to be a haven for these individuals and their families, just as it has been historically.

Since passage of the landmark Refugee Act of 1980, more than 2.6 million refugees and asylum seekers have been granted protection in the United States. In my home state of Vermont, I have seen how the admission of these refugees and asylum seekers – almost 5,600 in the last 20 years - has revitalized and enriched communities, resulting in the creation of new businesses, safer neighborhoods, and stronger schools. We are fortunate to have the Vermont Refugee Resettlement Program, with its decades of experience and award-winning volunteer program, leading this effort. Over the last five years, many of these new Vermonters have come from Bhutan, Burma, and the Congo. As they become small business owners, nurses, and soccer coaches, they contribute to the well-being of our communities and their culture enriches my historically Anglo-Saxon and French-Canadian state.

Vermonters have played a tremendous role in welcoming refugees and asylum-seekers to their communities. Many have hosted refugee families in their homes until suitable housing could be found. Despite this generous community support, however, Vermont's resettlement program is not without its challenges. We experience many of the same hurdles faced by resettlement efforts and receiving communities across the Nation. To help address these hurdles, the Refugee Protection Act of 2013 includes provisions that will help the nationwide resettlement effort operate more effectively.

In addition to support and improvement of the resettlement program, this bill concerns several areas of domestic asylum adjudication that are in need of significant reform. This bill would

repeal the one-year filing deadline for asylum seekers, removing an unnecessary barrier to protection. The bill would allow arriving aliens and minors to seek asylum first before the Asylum Office, rather than referring those cases immediately to immigration court. The Asylum Office is well trained to screen for fraud and is able to handle a slight increase in its caseload. Meanwhile, as we have heard from many immigration experts, the immigration courts are overburdened, under-resourced, and facing steady increases in their caseloads.

The Refugee Protection Act ensures that persons who were victims of terrorism or persecution by terrorist groups will not be doubly victimized with a denial of protection in the United States. Vermont Immigration and Asylum Advocates, a legal aid provider and a collaborator in the New England Survivor of Torture and Trauma program, continues to see cases where persons granted asylum are later blocked from bringing their families to the United States or from applying for permanent residency by overly broad definitions in current law. This bill would help such persons prove their cases without taking any shortcuts that could harm national security. The bill also gives the President the authority to designate certain particularly vulnerable groups for expedited consideration. All refugees would still have to complete security and background checks prior to entry to the United States.

Finally, the bill recognizes the need to treat genuine asylum seekers as persons in need of protection, not as criminals. It calls for asylum seekers who can prove their identities and who pose no threat to the United States to be released from immigration detention. Vermont Immigration and Asylum Advocates, like other legal aid providers across the Nation, struggle to visit detention facilities located at great distance, or to reach clients who have been transferred to far away locations. I appreciate efforts made by the Obama administration to parole eligible asylum seekers and to improve the conditions of detention overall, but more must be done. The Refugee Protection Act will improve access to counsel so that asylum seekers with genuine claims can gain legal assistance in presenting their claims. It will require the Government to codify detention standards to ensure that reforms are meaningful and enforceable. These reforms are humane and fair, but they will also save taxpayer dollars because of the high costs associated with unnecessary detentions.

There is no question that the United States is a leader among nations in refugee protection, but we can do better. The refugees we welcome to our shores contribute to the fabric of our Nation, and enrich the communities where they settle. I urge all Senators to support the Refugee Protection Act of 2013.