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The U.S. Commitment to Refugee Protection and Assistance; Humanitarian and Strategic Imperative

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You have escaped alive. Your life will not be what it was, but it will continue. You can't go back to where they deny your rights, take your possessions, hurt you and your family, where they may even try to kill you, because of who you are your faith, your political stance, your ethnic background, your social group.

You are among millions of human beings in our world today who are in this situation. You are the Karen villagers driven out by the oppressive rulers of Burma; the religious minorities of Iran; the victims of violence in Darfur; the North Koreans subject to imprisonment or torture for the crime of seeking a better life, you are among the ethnic Nepalese expelled from Bhutan in an act of ethnic cleansing.

Now you are in a camp or shelter, subject to the good graces of your hosts, waiting for the day when you can begin again if things change at home, if you are offered a permanent status in your country of refuge, if you are resettled to another land.

What difference does your plight make to anyone in the United States? To the government of the United States? Americans want to help as individuals, we respond with empathy and concern. Those of us so blessed as to have been born and raised in the United States, and to have lived our lives in freedom, can only imagine the plight of a refugee. Even so, perhaps our parents or grandparents fled to this country, escaping tyranny and oppression in the lands of their birth. The stories of refugees today have echoes in many stories of the founding and growth of our nation. And the welcoming response of our nation is famously summarized in the stirring words inscribed on the Statute of Liberty written by Emma Lazarus, a descendant of European Jews who fled religious persecution "give me your tired, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

This history, compassion and dedication to upholding human dignity make up our humanitarian imperative. This is why collectively, as a nation, we concern ourselves with the plight of refugees overseas. I am honored that the President and Secretary Rice have charged me with the responsibility for reflecting the best humanitarian traditions of the American people, providing, with the taxpayer's money, protection and life-sustaining relief for refugees and victims of conflict around the world.

According to the definition of the UN Convention on Refugees, which we have largely adopted in U.S. law, a refugee is a person outside his or her country of origin who cannot return due a well-founded fear of persecution based on race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group. The UN Refugee agency, UNHCR, currently assists 8.4 million refugees. UNHCR also concerns itself with other vulnerable persons, including internally displaced persons (IDPs), who have the same needs as refugees, but have not crossed an international border. UNHCR currently assists 6.6 million IDPs, out of an estimated 20-25 million worldwide.

Working with our international partners, we have made life better for the millions of refugees and displaced people living in far flung camps. While visiting Kenya earlier this year I saw the work we sponsored in Kakuma camp on behalf of refugee health: from the provision of additional latrines to reduce the incidence of cholera, to the spraying campaign and mosquito nets to protect refugees from malaria, to the 120 bed hospital. I saw the vital lifesaving work of the therapeutic feeding center, and the merciful work of a physical therapist massaging the legs of a young patient suffering from muscular dystrophy.

We place a very high priority on preventing and addressing sexual abuse and exploitation, a terrible problem for the most vulnerable populations. We insist on higher standards from partners, and we have made great progress through programs that educate and empower victims. For example, a legal advocacy program we sponsor has enabled women in West Africa to prosecute their abusers, thus breaking the culture of impunity that allowed the abuse.

We are also focused on the need for education, and have funded schools for Afghan refugees in Pakistan providing opportunities and hope for the future to children, especially girls, who might otherwise never have received an education. We fund education services, including democracy, human rights, and tolerance education, for half a million Palestinian children.

We also fund vocational training and economic opportunities for refugees. For example, in Kakuma camp in Kenya, refugee men and women learn skills such as auto mechanics and sewing. While our assistance and protection in refugee camps is substantial, our major goal is to provide durable solutions for refugees, many of whom have been in camps for fifteen years and more. Most refugees want to go home and indeed they are returning in unprecedented numbers to such places as Afghanistan, Iraq, Liberia, Burundi, and Sudan. Former victims of conflicts, terror and tyranny are rebuilding their lives and their countries. We have supported repatriation in safety and dignity for many populations including the ongoing repatriation of Afghans,

which is truly a great humanitarian success story of our era. In Liberia a new era of hope is also allowing for the return of many refugees, and we are supporting that process. Sustaining these returns will continue to test and strengthen our country's commitment to help people build new lives in freedom.

Sometimes, refugees are able to make a new life in their country of refuge, and we assist this process. However, in many countries of first asylum are themselves troubled, have few resources and are to be commended for the generosity and sacrifice of hosting refugee populations. Tanzania, for example, hosts 500,000 refugees. Often these host countries are unable to integrate refugee populations who do not have the option of returning home. However, there are exceptions, and we were pleased to support the local integration of Angolan refugees in Zambia some years ago.

Sometimes, there is no option but resettlement to another country that has the means and willingness to offer a new start in life. The United States has a proud record of assisting refugees in many nations as well as offering many of them a chance at a new life here in America. Since World War II, more refugees have found permanent homes in the United States than in any other country. This past year, we opened our doors to more than 53,000 refugees from 55 countries more than all the other resettlement countries combined.

What makes this the work of the U.S. government? Why not leave this to the non-governmental sector? First, we have only to look at the causes and the dimensions of refugee protection and assistance to see that by it is a foreign policy concern. By the nature and scale of the problem, it's clear this has to be an international effort. There needs to be international agreement on how to define a refugee; and there needs to be collaboration in providing assistance. With millions of refugees in the world, no single country can do it alone. So the concept of burden sharing has been part of this international effort since the 1950s.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees was established on December 14, 1950 by the United Nations General Assembly. UNHCR has the international mandate to protect refugees, and co-ordinate international action to resolve refugee problems worldwide. Its primary purpose is to safeguard the rights and well-being of refugees, hold countries to their obligations under the 1951 Refugee Convention and ensure that people are not returned involuntarily to places where they may be tortured or killed.

It is a vital part of U.S. refugee policy to support the work of UNHCR and other multilateral organizations in meeting the needs of the world's most vulnerable people. This multilateral approach is a matter of principle and of pragmatism. The principle is that refugee assistance should be a shared, international responsibility.

Being pragmatic, we also see that the best vehicles for this assistance are international organizations including UNHCR; the UN Relief and Works Administration (UNWRA), which assists 4.3 million Palestinians, and the International Committee of the Red Cross. Working in concert with other donors ensures that the U.S. government gets a bigger bang for our buck by leveraging generous and predictable contributions with other donors. As a former legislator used to looking at line-item budgets, I came into this job a bit leery of the idea of handing large pots of money to international organizations. But I have been reassured by our comprehensive monitoring of their operations, and how their work facilitates the US refugee program. For example, I work very closely with Antonio Guterres, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and I see the value of the influence the United States has as the major donor in improving the operational efficiency of UNHCR.

As a fiscal conservative I am also happy to tell you that my bureau holds our NGO partners to stringent standards with a thorough monitoring and evaluation system. Our own administrative budget, at under 3%, is very lean.

This spring, Secretary Rice announced a major effort to reform our nation's foreign assistance program, to assure effectiveness and cohesion between foreign assistance and foreign policy goals. I believe my Bureau has an important role to play in this process. While our mandate is very specific, we collaborate closely with other U.S. government agencies, such as USAID, in our work overseas. We want to avoid duplication, and ensure that there are no programming gaps in our assistance for victims of conflict and disaster, and in our stabilization and development efforts.

The U.S. government has been active in international initiatives to improve humanitarian response. UNHCR, for example, has taken on expanded responsibilities with respect to internally displaced persons (IDPs). In Africa, we are supporting UNHCR in its efforts to expand protection and improve IDP camp management in Liberia and Uganda.

In Uganda, dubbed the least known humanitarian catastrophe in the world more than 1.5 million Ugandans have fled their homes in fear of Joseph Kony and the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA). Kony is a psychotic tyrant who reportedly wants to take over Uganda to rule it in his distorted vision of a Christian nation based on the 10 Commandments. To wage this war, Kony has abducted tens of thousands of boys and girls. The boys become soldiers or porters; the girls become sex slaves and doled out to his lieutenants. In the 20 years since this struggle began, Kony and his troops have tortured and killed thousands of fellow countrymen.

Behind me you'll see photos of the victims of Kony's madness in northern Uganda. I have to warn you they are quite graphic.

Indeed, there are so many IDPs in northern Uganda that more than 90 percent of the men, women and children who live in the three main districts Gulu, Kitgum and Pader now reside in IDP camps. The conditions in the camps are shockingly bad with a soaring mortality rate and more than 15 percent of the people infected with HIV/AIDS -- three times the national average. We believe UNHCR, with its proven skills in protection and camp management, can play a critical role in improving the conditions of the IDPs there.

Given that repressive regimes and failed states create refugees, we need to be aware that this has implications for our national security. As we assist victims of persecution and conflict, we transform societies and uphold the first pillar of President Bush's National Security Strategy: promoting freedom, justice and human dignity.

As the President said in his second inaugural address: "*For as long as whole regions of the world simmer in resentment and tyranny - prone to ideologies that feed hatred and excuse murder - violence will gather, and multiply in destructive power, and cross the most defended borders, and raise a mortal threat.*"

When people lose hope they become vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups. In Nepal, for example, there is real concern about recruitment among the Bhutanese refugees by Maoist groups. Some of the worst conditions in the world exist in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. Working with UNWRA, we aim to improve conditions for the refugees, and make them less vulnerable to terrorists seeking recruits.

Resolving refugee situations through providing durable solutions helps break ongoing cycles of violence and repression. U.S. assistance in response to the suffering in Sudan illustrates this effort. -- We are working to preserve the right of asylum and provide humanitarian assistance for over 200,000 Sudanese refugees who have fled from Darfur to twelve camps in eastern Chad. Since the onset of the crisis in Darfur in 2003, we have led all international donors by providing \$115 million in assistance to UN agencies, the International Committee of the Red Cross and international non-

governmental agencies (NGOs) for this population.

- We are also assisting Sudanese refugees in other countries
- We are assisting the voluntary return of Sudanese to the south in support of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement.

In the post 9/11 world, it is even more important that the United States leads efforts that provide hope to the victims of tyranny and oppression. Refugee protection and assistance are vital to this effort. Of course, there is no substitute for dealing with the root causes of refugee flows and displacement, including discrimination and the lack of freedom. I think this audience would not be surprised to learn that the major refugee-producing countries rank near the bottom of indices of freedom, including the Heritage Foundation Economic Freedom Index.

The global security environment has dramatically impacted humanitarian work making it more difficult and dangerous to provide services to refugees and other displaced populations. Since the horrific events of September 11, our country has been challenged to maintain the balance between keeping out terrorists who would do us harm and continuing our humanitarian tradition of providing refuge to the persecuted.

You may have read about amendments to our immigration laws, vastly expanding the definition of terrorism, that have had the unintended effect of barring victims of conflict and oppression whom we believe are deserving of our protection. We now estimate that, as a result of this issue, we will fall short by some 12,000 of 54,000 admissions for which we were funded. Many are now being disqualified because of their resistance activities to oppressive governments or because they have been coerced to provide "material support" to their persecutors. In order to preserve our country's well-deserved reputation for fairness and generosity, we will continue to address this issue at the highest levels of government until we arrive at a just resolution.

Perhaps the most gratifying aspect of our refugee program can be found by visiting our resettlement offices around the United States. I was inspired during a recent visit to the International Institute in Providence, Rhode Island, where I met current and former refugee clients. A Liberian refugee working as a health care provider welcomed me to her home. I met a small business whose owner is ecstatic about the work ethic of the 67 refugees he has hired. Best of all was the lunch I had with community leaders at a restaurant owned and managed by a former Cambodian refugee someone who had escaped from the killing fields of the Khmer Rouge, and now epitomizes the American dream.

Refugees can have a major positive impact on the economy of a region in Utica, New York, for example, a community which had suffered a major decline in population after the closure of a near-by military base and a number of manufacturing plants, has been revitalized by an influx of refugees who have provided a labor pool for new enterprises and renovated the housing stock of the city.

I am proud of the results of our work for refugees: millions are fed, clothed, housed, provided hope and a chance for a new life because of our efforts. And I am proud of what this does for the United States: we are advancing the interests and ideals of the American people, protecting and strengthening our nation.

I began by asking you to imagine yourself as a refugee. I have described what the U.S. refugee program means to you. Protection and assistance to refugees and other vulnerable populations is another way we fulfill the promise expressed by our President: *All who live in tyranny and hopelessness can know: the United States will not ignore your oppression, or excuse your oppressors. When you stand for your liberty, we will stand with you.*

Today, World Refugee Day, we are reminded of the suffering and the contributions of refugees. There are inspiring stories of refugees who have overcome their traumatic past and gone on to great business, scientific and artistic achievements. There are also millions of unsung stories of those mothers who have nurtured and raised their children against all odds, and in the most horrific conditions, those who rebuild their lives and communities on returning to their home countries, those who simply perform the heroic feat of carrying on and living in the hope of a better day.

All deserve our respect and support. We also remember the commitment and dedication of those who work on behalf of refugees: those in difficult and dangerous conditions in the field; those who welcome refugees into their communities. Let us remind ourselves of our American commitment to keep the flame of hope alive for refugees. Finally, let us allow refugees to remind us, with the long road they have walked for freedom, that freedom is precious, and worth all our efforts to defend it.

