

STATEMENT OF NAOMI STEINBERG
on behalf of
THE EAST ASIA JOINT REGIONAL WORKING GROUP
REFUGEE COUNCIL USA
AT THE PUBLIC HEARING OF THE BUREAU OF POPULATION, REFUGEES AND
MIGRATION, DEPARTMENT OF STATE
REGARDING THE US REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT PROGRAM FOR FISCAL YEAR 2011
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On behalf of Refugee Council USA (RCUSA) and the members of the East Asia Joint Regional Working Group, I thank PRM for the opportunity to offer testimony about the resettlement needs of refugees in East Asia. Today, I will specifically discuss the situations of the Rohingya, Chin refugees in New Delhi, North Koreans, Burmese refugees in Thailand, the Lao Hmong, and asylum seekers in Indonesia.

The urgent necessity to find a long-term, durable solution for the Rohingya, a stateless population from western Myanmar, has not lessened. The Rohingya have consistently suffered persecution and were effectively stripped of their citizenship rights in 1982. Further, within Myanmar, they have very limited freedom of movement, no freedom of religion, and frequently experience land seizure, forced labor and arbitrary arrest. As a result, hundreds of thousands of Rohingya have fled Myanmar, many through extraordinarily dangerous smuggling networks, and now live in Malaysia, Indonesia, Australia, Bangladesh, Thailand, India, and the Middle East.

The recent crackdown on Rohingya in Bangladesh illuminates the precarious circumstances of Rohingyas as they seek protection throughout the region. Since July 2009, Bangladeshi law enforcement agencies have implemented campaigns against Rohingya refugees who live in Bandarban District, and more recently, since early January 2010, additional crackdowns targeting Rohingya refugees living outside of the two official refugee camps in Cox's Bazar District have taken place. These crackdowns have taken different forms, including the arrest of hundreds of unregistered Rohingya, some of whom were forced to return to Burma, and thousands have been evicted from their homes. It was also reported that there was an increase in violent attacks targeting unregistered Rohingya. Many of the victims of these campaigns have fled to Kutupalong camp, an unofficial camp with no real protection mechanisms in place, and now has an estimated population of 30,000.

The complexity of this situation warrants a coordinated regional and global response, and RCUSA members urge the U.S. to provide leadership in the effort to find a comprehensive response to this humanitarian crisis. RCUSA asks that the United States coordinate closely with UNHCR and the international community to ensure that durable solutions are found for this population. We also ask that the U.S. work closely with all of the relevant partners to ensure that the governments of first asylum for the Rohingya respect international law and the principle of *non-refoulement*. In addition, while we are encouraged by news of efforts to pre-screen and interview a small caseload of Rohingya referred by UNHCR-Bangladesh, we continue to recommend that the U.S. government and UNHCR expeditiously take the steps that are necessary for the implementation of P2 group referrals for the Rohingya.

RCUSA members would also like to highlight the plight of Chin refugees in New Delhi, a population that frequently does not garner the attention it deserves, even though many have been living in India since the 1970s. While UNHCR has a presence in Delhi and is able to register and resettle small numbers of Chin, they have been precluded from establishing operations in Mizoram State, where an estimated 50,000-100,000 Chin asylum seekers reside, forcing many of them to make the journey to Delhi to register with UNHCR. At the end of 2009, UNHCR had registered between 3,000-4,000 Burmese in Delhi, the majority of whom are Chin.

Chin refugees living in Delhi face significant challenges in their efforts to live safe and healthy lives. The tension between the local population and the Chin is severe due to the extreme poverty in which everyone lives. The Chin have limited access to medical care, clean water, and education. Their housing conditions are deplorable and they face constant rent discrimination and threats of eviction. Underemployment and wage discrimination continue to plague the community; and harassment, including sexual harassment and rape, as well as other violent attacks, are additional obstacles the Chin are forced to confront. As recently as last week, four Chin refugees, all registered with UNHCR, were violently attacked in separate incidents. For example, on April 21st, a father was walking with his two young daughters to get water from a public water source. On their way home, he was hit in the head with a brick or stone and knocked unconscious. An untold number of people walked by the injured man, and it was not until three other Chin refugees saw what happened that he was taken to their home and ultimately the hospital. It took almost 24 hours for the police to begin to investigate the incident, and there is no real hope that the perpetrators will be brought to justice. The victim and his family arrived in New Delhi in 1999 and are surviving with the support of fellow refugees and the church.

Due to the lack of legal protection and status for refugees in India; continued instability within Myanmar; and the severe discrimination and violence that makes local integration an untenable durable solution for Chin refugees in New Delhi, RCUSA recommends that the U.S. government and UNHCR take the steps needed for increased resettlement from New Delhi, including the consideration of the implementation of P2 referrals. RCUSA also urges the U.S. government to fully engage the government of India to allow UNHCR to access Burmese refugees throughout India, including in Mizoram State.

In addition, as the world looks to Myanmar as it prepares for its 2010 elections, significant concern remains about the conditions in Eastern Burma, as well as the government's efforts to convert ethnic armies into border forces under control of the central government. The implementation of this plan already resulted in 3,000 Karen crossing the border into Thailand in June 2009 after attacks and suffering human rights abuses at the hands of the Burmese Army and the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA). While all of this group of Karen have since returned to Myanmar, the majority of whom having left because the conditions in the camps in which they resided were so terrible that staying longer was not a viable option, it is essential that the Royal Thai Government (RTG) is prepared to address the needs of any newly arriving refugees from Burma. Although the Burmese refugee resettlement program is scheduled to end in 2010, resettlement options need to remain available. RCUSA encourages the United States government to work with Thai authorities to screen and register newly arriving refugees for

resettlement. We also are interested in learning the results of the recent assessment UNHCR and the RTG conducted of the estimated 40,000 new Burmese arrivals in Thailand.

RCUSA members also remain concerned about the estimated 50,000 to 400,000 North Koreans hiding in “the underground” in China and throughout Southeast Asia at any given time. North Korean refugees in China are considered illegal economic migrants and are sought and repatriated by the Chinese government. Bounties and rewards are often used as incentive to capture and repatriate these refugees. Upon repatriation, North Koreans are subject to harsh imprisonment, interrogation and torture, rape, forced abortion, infanticide, forced labor, and even execution. We continue to urge the United States to work in partnership with UNHCR in order to encourage the Chinese government to stop the arrest and deportation of North Koreans on Chinese soil and instead adhere to the tenants set forth in the *1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees* and its *1967 Protocol*, China being a signatory to both documents. In addition, we would like the United States to work in cooperation with UNHCR to encourage China to allow UNHCR access to the North Koreans in China and permit UNHCR to determine their refugee status.

To date, over 17,000 North Korean refugees have resettled in South Korea, as well as over 1,400 in the European Union. However, since the U.S. passed the *North Korean Human Rights Act* in 2004, approximately 100 North Korean refugees have been resettled in the United States, the first group arriving in 2006. In the past, many North Korean refugees experienced severe and extended delays, sometimes up to two years, residing in unsafe circumstances while waiting to be processed. This often resulted in many refugees being deterred or abandoning their claims for U.S. resettlement due to the pace of the screening. However, we applaud the United States government’s efforts to create more efficient and timely processes, enabling the resettlement of more North Korean refugees to the United States. We continue to support the United States’ efforts to clearly identify North Korean refugees as a humanitarian and foreign policy priority by working with a greater number of countries in which screening and processing of North Korean refugees for domestic resettlement can take place.

Furthermore, RCUSA recognizes and appreciates that the United States government and UNHCR strongly condemned the involuntary returns of more than 4,000 Lao Hmong from Bun Huay Nam Khai Thailand and the 158 UNHCR recognized Lao Hmong from Thailand’s Nong Khai Detention Center. We ask that the United States and UNHCR continue to work in close coordination to urge the Lao government to allow an independent, international monitoring entity access to the returnees in order to guarantee their safety. We also ask that the United States continue to engage the Lao government in dialogue to encourage allowing UNHCR access to the returnees for the implementation of an internationally recognized refugee status determination process. Those with protection concerns should be free to leave Laos for third country resettlement.

Lastly, it is estimated that at the end of 2009 there were 1,500 registered refugees in Indonesia and another 1,500 unregistered refugees. These refugees came from Iraq, Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Afghanistan, and Somalia, and all found that while they are able to stay in Indonesia until a more permanent solution is found, permanent integration in Indonesia is not a possibility. Currently, UNHCR is working with the Indonesian government to increase national capacity in preparation

for Indonesia becoming a signatory to the *1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees* and its *1967 Protocol*. As this process continues, RCUSA recommends that the United States look at increasing resettlement opportunities for refugees in Indonesia.

We thank you again for the opportunity to provide recommendations on the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program, and look forward to continued dialogue as the refugee admissions goals for fiscal year 2011 are developed.