

Statement of The Honorable Patrick Leahy

United States Senator  
Vermont  
May 19, 2010

Statement Of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),  
Chairman, Senate Judiciary Committee,  
Hearing On "Renewing America's Commitment To The Refugee Convention:  
The Refugee Protection Act Of 2010"  
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Earlier this year, we marked the 30th anniversary of the Refugee Act. In the years since that landmark legislation was enacted, the law has evolved in ways that place unnecessary and harmful barriers before genuine refugees and asylum seekers. That is why I introduced the Refugee Protection Act of 2010, S.3113. It will bring the United States into compliance with the Refugee Convention, and will restore our Nation as a beacon of hope for those who suffer from persecution around the world. I thank Senators Levin, Durbin, Akaka and Burris for joining as cosponsors.

I supported the Refugee Act in the 96th Congress, and voted for it when it passed the Senate. When the Senate debated the bill, Senator Ted Kennedy spoke of its dual goals -- to "welcome homeless refugees to our shores," thereby embracing "one of the oldest and most important themes in our Nation's history," and to "give statutory meaning to our national commitment to human rights and humanitarian concerns." We lost Senator Kennedy last year, but we can honor his memory and one of America's greatest traditions by carrying forward the mantle of refugee protection.

The Refugee Protection Act of 2010 corrects misinterpretations of law that limit access to safety in the United States for asylum seekers. The legislation contains provisions from a bipartisan bill I introduced in the 106th and 107th Congresses to correct the harshest and most unnecessary elements of the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996. That law had tragic consequences for asylum seekers. Finally, our current proposal modifies the immigration statute to ensure that innocent persons with valid claims for protection are not unfairly barred from the United States by laws enacted after September 11, 2001, to prevent terrorists from manipulating our immigration system. It corrects the law without diluting the bars to admission for dangerous terrorists and criminals.

In the years since the Refugee Act was enacted, over 2.6 million refugees and asylum seekers have been granted protection in the United States. I am proud that my home state of Vermont has long assisted asylum applicants with their requests for protection and welcomed refugees through resettlement programs. More than 5,300 refugees have been resettled in Vermont since 1989, from countries as diverse as Burma, Bhutan, Somalia, Sudan, Bosnia, and Vietnam. One of our witnesses today is Patrick Giantonio, Executive Director of Vermont Immigration and Asylum Advocates. He is one of the many Vermonters who devote countless hours to help victims of persecution win protection and build new lives in our state and our country. We cannot thank you enough for your dedication to these exceptionally worthy individuals.

I also welcome Dan Glickman, who was recently appointed the President of Refugees International. I had the honor of working with Dan when he was a member of the House of Representatives, when he served as Secretary of Agriculture in the Clinton administration, and more recently at the Motion Picture Association of America. Dan has devoted years of his life to fighting hunger and advocating

for underserved populations. Now he is taking on a new challenge in protecting refugees around the world.

Our third witness, Igor Timofeyev, served as the Special Adviser on Refugees and Asylees at the Department of Homeland Security during the Bush administration. We welcome him, and look forward to hearing from all three witnesses on the key reforms to our refugee laws that are contained in the Refugee Protection Act.

It is time to renew America's commitment to the Refugee Convention, and to bring our law back into compliance with the Convention's promise of protection. Our Nation is a leader among the asylum-providing countries. Our communities have embraced refugees and asylum seekers, welcoming them as Americans. Our laws should reflect America's humanitarian spirit.