

15 April 2009

Dear President Obama:

On behalf of the members of Refugee Council USA, a coalition of 25 non-governmental organizations based in the United States that advocate for the rights and protection of refugees around the globe, we are pleased that you will attend the Summit of the Americas, and we ask that you use this valuable opportunity to highlight refugee and displacement issues, especially as they pertain to Colombians and Haitians.

Colombian Displacement

Displacement concerns in the Western Hemisphere are often overlooked, in part because the populations in the Americas are largely not confined to refugee camp-like settings, yet the continued conflict in Colombia has led to one of the most dire displacement crises in the world. Most discussion about Colombia points to the relatively positive security gains. This focus overlooks the fact that last year alone an additional 300,000 persons were forcibly displaced from their homes and land, bringing the total number of internally displaced to an estimated four million.

An additional 500,000 to 750,000 Colombians have sought refuge and protection in other countries in the region, namely Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama, and Costa Rica. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has expressed concern over their physical security, as irregular armed groups operate on and easily traverse the border, infiltrating the communities in which refugees have sought protection. In Ecuador and Venezuela the Colombian population is largely unregistered and unassisted by the UNHCR. In light of growing xenophobia, unaccompanied minors, women-headed households, and Afro-Colombians are particularly vulnerable.

We remain concerned about the confinement of Colombian refugees in the southern jungle region of Panama, and the persistent threats of deportation perpetrated against Colombian asylum-seekers in Panama City. The Panamanian government should follow through on its promises to regularize the Colombian refugee population that has lived within its borders for fifteen years or more without legal status.

Haitian Displacement

The social, political, and economic conditions in Haiti, the lack of central government control over much of the country, and the emergence of criminal gangs filling the void left by the state, have forced thousands of Haitians to leave their homes in search of greater security abroad. Approximately one-third of the country is internally displaced and thousands more have crossed the border into the Dominican Republic or braved the seas in boats to escape generalized or targeted violence. In September 2008 Haiti suffered massive destruction wreaked by four deadly storms: Tropical Storms Fay and Hanna and Hurricanes Gustav and Ike. The devastating storm damage not only left many of Haiti's 8.5 million citizens homeless and displaced without food, water, shelter, or healthcare but has also compounded the food shortage crisis which came to light during the food riots in April 2008.

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U.S. Conference of Catholic
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Services
U.S. Committee for Refugees
and Immigrants
Women's Commission for
Refugee Women & Children
World Relief

Under the current circumstances deportations of Haitian nationals is improper and untenable. We urge all American states to cease deportations of Haitians during this chaotic and vulnerable time, allowing the Haitian government to invest its limited resources in rebuilding damaged infrastructure and offering emergency relief to its suffering citizens.

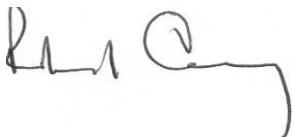
In addition we remain concerned about the plight of Haitians residing in the Dominican Republic. Haitian asylum-seekers in the Dominican Republic are treated as economic migrants. Some have waited sixteen years for an asylum decision. The Dominican Republic continues to have a significant asylum backlog and has failed to allow for the permanent presence of an UNHCR office in the Dominican Republic. We ask that you raise the need for the Dominican Republic to allow UNHCR to re-establish its office in the country, so that the agency may work with the government toward fulfilling its obligations and responsibilities to refugees and to stateless persons under the *1951 Refugee Convention* and other instruments of international law.

Mexico Plan of Action

On a positive note we respectfully request that you recognize the generosity and openness demonstrated by some states in the region when it comes to providing a broader space for international refugee protection in the context of the implementation of the Mexico Plan of Action, of which the U.S. funded a portion. The increased focus on human rights, adoption of national legislation to implement international refugee law, and the establishment of viable regional resettlement channels through the “Solidarity Resettlement Program” are efforts that the NGO community recognizes and fully supports.

We thank you for the efforts you will make at the Summit to encourage positive trends in the area of refugee and internally displaced persons protection in the Americas.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Robert J. Carey', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Robert J. Carey
Chair, Refugee Council USA