

Testimony of

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I am Johnny Young, executive director of Migration and Refugee Services of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (MRS/USCCB). I am pleased to be here today to speak with the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) of the U.S. State Department (DOS) regarding the issue of refugee protection. I would like to speak today to several vulnerable populations, including the Rohingya Burmese in Bangladesh, Sri Lankans in Southern India, and Zimbabweans in South Africa. I also would like to make some points on unaccompanied refugee minors.

Rohingya Burmese

In October of last year, a delegation of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops visited Bangladesh to examine the conditions and plight of thousands of Rohingya refugees located in southeast Bangladesh. These refugees, primarily of the Muslim faith, have fled persecution from the government in Myanmar/Burma, which does not consider them true Burmese citizens. They have experienced widespread abuses, including forced relocations, murder, and rape. Within their home country, the Rohingya have no government-issued identity documents, cannot move freely around the country, endure forced labor, see their land confiscated, and require government permission to marry. They are not listed among Burma's official minorities, the regime's way of indicating that they have no right to citizenship, despite their residency in Burma for generations. They are stateless people.

In addition, they experience horrid living conditions, often without water and food. In some parts of Rakhine State, the malnutrition rate is 25 percent.

Within Bangladesh, the Rohingya population for years was not recognized with any legal status or identification documents. Recently, refugees in the camps have been registered by UNHCR, but those living outside the camps continue to live without documentation. Many are ostracized by the local communities, who also are poor and view the Rohingya as competitors for limited resources.

Currently, about 28,000 officially registered Rohingya refugees live in two camps (Nayapara and Kutupalong) near the Burmese border, which are administered by UNHCR. Another 10,000 live in an "unrecognized" site called Leda, administered by the Bangladeshi government. An additional 5,000 live unofficially outside the Kutupalong camp and an UNHCR estimated 100,000 or more stay in the villages and towns of southeast Bangladesh, near the city of Cox's Bazar. In Burma/Myanmar's Rakhine State, where the Rohingya live, about 800,000 attempt to survive. They still arrive in Bangladesh in small numbers (40-50 a month), but, should circumstances worsen, many more could be driven to Bangladesh. Significant numbers have already

fled to Malaysia and Thailand. In a recent case noted worldwide, Thai authorities denied port entry to a boat carrying Rohingya refugees, returning them to sea.

The most important hope for the Rohingya in Bangladesh and other places is that they achieve a status that will allow them to leave normal lives. Given the limited options for this population, we strongly believe that the Rohingya in Bangladesh should receive a Priority Two designation from the U.S. government, allowing them to be resettled as members of a persecuted group. We would encourage the resettlement of vulnerable cases (unaccompanied children, women head of household, elderly) first, but believe that all registered in the camps should be given resettlement consideration. Refugees living outside the camps should be given identification documents and legal status in Bangladesh.

Sri Lankan refugees in Southern India

The civil war in Sri Lanka, ongoing since 1983, has produced thousands of refugees, many of whom fled across the Palk Strait to India's Tamil Nadu state, located in southern India. Our delegation visited several of 117 refugee camps in the region, which house up to 75,000 refugees. Predominant among the population were young persons who demonstrated ability and ambition, but have no option for continuing their educations outside the camps.

With the civil war apparently approaching a conclusion, it is important that the international community, including the U.S. government, work toward a peaceful settlement and repatriation of refugees to their homeland. Pressure should be applied to the Sri Lankan government to allow long-term refugees to return to their homes and resume their lives.

Many will be unable to return to Sri Lanka, however, so integration projects in India and some targeted resettlement is necessary. We applaud PRM for its funding of projects within the camps in Southern India and their funding of the relocation of camps to more sanitary venues. We encourage continued funding of projects, especially those that improve sanitary conditions in the camps, as well as ongoing education for young persons.

We encourage the U.S. government to accept for resettlement humanitarian cases, such as unaccompanied minors, the elderly, or single heads of households, who are unable to return to Sri Lanka and are limited in India.

Zimbabwean Refugees in South Africa

We encourage PRM to examine the plight of Zimbabwean refugees fleeing into South Africa. MRS/USCCB intends to visit the region in late August and early September. From other accounts, however, a large number of Zimbabweans have fled across the Zimbabwean-South Africa border, escaping political persecution and food shortages.

Most particularly unaccompanied children and women have fled Zimbabwe in recent months. We intend to have more detailed information for PRM in the months ahead.

Colombians in Central and South America

MRS/USCCB holds special concern for Colombians who have fled civil war and strife in their native Colombia. They are located in several countries, including Ecuador, Panama, Venezuela, and Peru. They flee violence at the hands of rebel groups and are often the victims of forced support for these groups, disqualifying them for U.S. resettlement or asylum relief because of the material support bar. In fact, the resettlement of Colombians has come to a halt the past few years, leaving many in precarious situations.

We urge PRM to once again look at the plight of Colombians and restart a resettlement program for this vulnerable population.

Recommendations:

- We encourage PRM to grant a Priority-Two designation to Rohingya Burmese in southeast Bangladesh and initiate a resettlement program for refugees registered in both UNHCR and government camps. Special attention and priority should be given to vulnerable cases, as designated by UNHCR.
- We recommend that PRM consider the resettlement of humanitarian cases of Sri Lankan refugees in Southern India who are unable to return to Sri Lanka and are limited in their options in India, such as unaccompanied minors and other vulnerable cases. We strongly urge the U.S. government to work toward a peace agreement in Sri Lanka which includes safe and successful repatriation and integration of refugees into Sri Lanka.
- We encourage PRM to investigate the circumstances of Zimbabwean refugees in South Africa, especially unaccompanied minors and women.
- We urge PRM to reconsider the cases of Colombian refugees who flee the 40-year civil war in their country and to work with DHS to establish a waiver for the material support bar for this population.

Unaccompanied Refugee Minors

As you know, MRS/USCCB has long held interest in the plight of unaccompanied refugee minors (URMs). We are saddened to see that PRM has not focused upon URMs in a concentrated effort, and encourage the bureau to pay special attention to this vulnerable population. Only 64 were resettled in 2007 and a similar number in 2008.

All of the populations in our testimony include URMS. UNHCR estimates that 3-5 percent of refugee flows are unaccompanied or separated refugee minors. There are over 420,000 unaccompanied refugee minors in the world.

MRS/USCCB believes that URMs are particularly vulnerable, and, under certain circumstances, should be given the opportunity to escape the imprisonment of refugee camps and start a new life in a new country. DOS, UNHCR, and NGOs should be aware of the particular vulnerabilities of children worldwide and insist that durable solutions be found for them as soon as possible.

We believe that PRM should use Best Interest Determinations for unaccompanied refugee minors in all situations, not only to determine resettlement opportunities but also to maintain family relationships. URMs resettled in this country should be able to petition for other family members, such as siblings and other close relatives, in a timely manner.

Recommendations:

- PRM should use best interest determinations for unaccompanied refugee minors in all refugee situations and increase the number of URMs considered for resettlement.
- URMs should be given the ability to petition for close relatives and siblings in an expedited manner.
- NGOs should be used to refer URMs to the State Department for resettlement.

In conclusion, MRS/USCCB values the relationship with PRM and views it as a partnership. We look forward to working with you in the year ahead, so that lives can be saved and the U.S. can show leadership to the rest of the world in the area of refugee protection.

Thank you.