

**Statement of HIAS (the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society)
Public Meeting on the FY 2009 Refugee Admissions Program
United States Department of State
Arlington, Virginia
June 11, 2008
Presented by Lisa Shuger, Washington Director**

My name is Lisa Shuger, Director of the Washington, D.C. Office of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. Thank you for this opportunity to present HIAS' views on the fiscal year 2009 Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP).

HIAS is the international migration agency of the American Jewish Community – a community that has long viewed the U.S. refugee program as a pillar of U.S. foreign policy, of U.S. humanitarian policy, and of our national heritage as a land of refuge for those who have fled persecution. HIAS is proud to be a part of this private-public partnership involving the Departments of State, Homeland Security, Health and Human Services, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and our colleague agencies in Refugee Council USA. Any criticisms offered today should be taken in the same spirit as they are offered – recognizing that we are all committed to working together to help refugees help themselves to rebuild new lives in peace and dignity.

First, I would like to speak on refugees from Iran – which every year since the passage of the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998, the U.S. has designated a “Country of Particular Concern” for severe, egregious and systematic violations of religious freedom. As the agency which operates the Overseas Processing Entity (OPE) in Vienna for religious minorities fleeing Iran, HIAS can attest that the public-private partnership between HIAS, the Government of Austria, the Department of State Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM), the Department of Homeland Security U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), and the refugee resettlement networks of the national voluntary agencies is functioning more smoothly than ever. Denial rates in Vienna have been negligible, and case processing has been efficient. This is due to the excellent teamwork with all of the players in the program. This success is also due to the application of the Lautenberg Amendment, which has successfully prevented bona fide refugee applicants from being stuck in Austria, as has happened in the past.

HIAS is troubled, however, that limitations of the Austrian governments' capacity to issue visas have contributed to a religious minorities being stuck in Iran for upwards of two years. Until the Austrian government increases its capacity to issue visas, we urge the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program to urgently continue to consider and move forward with additional satellite venues in which the OPE can process refugee applicants and reduce the waiting time in Iran.

With regard to processing in the former Soviet Union, however, HIAS remains concerned by high denial rates of Jewish, Evangelical, and UNHCR referrals. HIAS remains troubled that USCIS continues to flaunt the statutory requirement of the Lautenberg Amendment that denials of Jewish and Evangelical in the FSU be explained to the “maximum extent feasible.” The only explanation currently given in denial notices is a checkmark or two. HIAS calls upon USCIS to immediately bring itself into compliance with the law in Moscow by providing transparency to the adjudication process. We warmly welcome recent indications from USCIS that it intends to provide greater transparency to refugee decisions worldwide, but suggest this begins in Moscow without any further delay.

The USRAP continues to rely on ordinary approaches to process Iraqi refugees facing extraordinary threats to their security. HIAS is particularly concerned that – given that only 12,000 resettlement places are available for Iraqis – Iraqi religious minorities continue to face severe difficulties just getting an interview with USCIS. The problem is even more dire for Iraqi Palestinians, who have been chased out of their homes and into isolated camps in no-mans lands along the Iraqi border. In spite of a universally acknowledged need for resettlement of this group, only Chile and Brazil have demonstrated leadership and accepted more than a handful for resettlement. The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program exists to protect particularly vulnerable group like this – and we are disappointed that the USRAP has yet to make any noticeable effort to save the lives of this population in danger.

For the last several public meetings, HIAS focused its remarks largely on the issue of material support – a provision of the USA Patriot and REAL ID Acts. As you are well aware, this provision has effectively barred from the U.S. victims of rape, robbery, extortion, and mutilation for knowingly – even if unwillingly – providing support to the terrorists who persecuted them. While the law was amended in December 2007 to allow DHS considerably greater authority to waive inadmissibility under this provision, HIAS is disappointed that implementation of waivers has remained slow – and has been virtually non-existent for the many refugees in Africa whose applications have been placed on indefinite hold due to the material support bar.

Even with the legislation, the refugee applicants and asylum seekers whose cases have been put on hold are not the only victims of the material support bar. The bar continues to devastate the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program and severely undermine U.S. leadership in the realm of refugee protection.

Finally, the real heroes in the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program are the local organizations – in the case of HIAS our network of Jewish family service agencies and others – who work directly with newly arrived refugees to help them adjust to life in the United States. The work of these agencies and their caseworkers is the embodiment of the Jewish teaching to “welcome the stranger.” Yet these local heroes are under constant financial pressure to drop out of refugee resettlement because of the unpredictable nature of arrivals. The lower refugee admissions fall below targets, the more difficult it becomes for local agencies to support the infrastructure necessary to serve refugees. When refugees do arrive, they tend to arrive in disproportionately large numbers at the very end of the fiscal year. We urge PRM to take measures to insulate local agencies better from admissions fluctuations – both year to year and quarter to quarter.

Thank you very much for listening to our concerns and for your partnership in rebuilding refugee lives through resettlement.