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FOR THE RCUSA MEMBERS  
OF THE NEAR EAST SOUTH ASIA WORKING GROUP

AT THE PUBLIC HEARING OF THE BUREAU OF POPULATION, REFUGEES, AND  
MIGRATION, DEPARTMENT OF STATE

REGARDING THE US REFUGEE RESETTLEMENT PROGRAM  
FOR FISCAL YEAR 2009

June 11, 2008

On behalf of the RCUSA members of the Near East South Asia Working Group, I thank you for this opportunity to address the resettlement needs of the refugees in our region.

It will come as no surprise that the protection needs of Iraqi refugees remain a grave concern to us. Despite some signs of easing of the security situation in Iraq over the past year, the vast majority of Iraqi refugees are not prepared to risk return to places where they were so recently the victims of terror and abuse, nor would it be reasonable to expect that they would do so. Unfortunately, the humanitarian situation faced by refugees in the Middle East continues to deteriorate. Forced to flee because of their religious beliefs, because they belong to an ethnic minority, or because they agreed to work with US forces and interests, many Iraqi refugees have exhausted their resources, yet are denied the right to work and too often lack access to basic humanitarian assistance.

Although it is to be hoped that the majority of Iraqi refugees will eventually have the opportunity to return voluntarily and in safety and dignity to their homeland, at present and for the foreseeable future resettlement must be a vital part of the response needed to provide protection to the most vulnerable in this population. In addition, significant assistance to Iraqi refugees in the region and to the countries hosting them is an essential complement to resettlement, enabling their needs to be met, the burden on host countries to be eased and host governments to become more open to recognizing a legal status for Iraqi refugees that will protect them and reduce their fears.

As this is the case, we appreciate the considerable effort made by the US government over the past year to enhance processing capacity in the region. We are especially glad to note the recent opening of a permanent office in Baghdad for in-country processing, as recommended in our testimony of last year. Nonetheless, five years after the onset of this crisis the resettlement process is still too limited and too lengthy, while tens of thousands remain in desperate need. We urge that the US continue to work with UNHCR and the NGO community to expand existing efforts so that vulnerable refugees including members of religious and ethnic minorities, women at risk, separated children, and survivors of trauma, and other compelling cases including former employees of the US government and US based

organizations, close family members of US citizens and legal residents can be identified and resettled more quickly.

I would like to call particular attention to the plight of Palestinian refugees from Iraq, whose situation is particularly perilous. These refugees, who have become the subject of targeted violence in Iraq, have been tragically denied access to asylum in the region. Over 700 Palestinians who have fled Iraq since 2003 are subsisting in appalling conditions in Al Tanf camp on the Iraq-Syria border. Others who have attempted to flee are stranded within the borders of Iraq at Al Waleed and in Syria at Al Hol. A total of 2,700 Palestinians find themselves in these camps, and an additional 13,000 are estimated to remain in Iraq with no means of escape.

It is widely agreed that resettlement is the only available durable solution for these refugees. Although a few states, including Brazil, Chile, Canada and the US have accepted limited numbers, a far more generous response is required. We call upon the US to demonstrate leadership in meeting the urgent protection needs of this population. Until their resettlement can be achieved, we ask that immediate arrangements be made to relocate the Palestinians to a safe transit location while their cases are processed.

With regard to the processing of refugees from Iran, we are grateful to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program and the Government of Austria for providing Iranian religious minorities with a route to freedom through Vienna to the United States. However, given visa issuance limitations at the Austrian consulate of 85 visas per week, there is now a two year wait for more than 10,000 refugee applicants who cannot leave Iran. We urge the United States to urgently pursue additional venues for the OPE to process cases in order to alleviate that backlog.

The situation of Somali and Ethiopian refugees in Yemen remains of concern. Over 250,000 refugees of these nationalities are estimated to subsist in Yemen, one of the poorest countries of the world. The US should support the UNHCR efforts to register and assist these refugees through more generous funding of their under-resourced office there, and should continue to accept referrals of resettlement cases.

Political turmoil in Afghanistan continues to make the return of remaining vulnerable Afghan refugees in Pakistan problematic. Although the majority of Afghans in Pakistan are not considered to be candidates for resettlement, we urge that the US program remain available to vulnerable individuals, especially women at risk and unaccompanied children. Given the resurgence of Taliban activity in Afghanistan, we also ask that the US be open to the resettlement of new refugees who may be in need of protection.

Moving beyond the Near East to South Asia, we are pleased to note that the long awaited resettlement of the Bhutanese from Nepal is now underway. While the program in most respects appears to be operating smoothly, additional efforts are needed to counteract the intimidation of refugees considering resettlement by a small number of activists in the community who oppose resettlement for political reasons. Efforts by UNHCR and the US

government to provide accurate information on the resettlement option have been helpful and must continue.

The Bhutanese are the first large predominantly Hindu refugee population to be resettled in the United States. When I visited Nepal in late February, many refugees expressed concerns as to whether they would be able to practice their religion and maintain their cultural traditions in this country after resettlement. Toward this end, I would like to express the hope of our working group that care will be taken to place these refugees in communities where they will have access to temples and existing Nepali groups that can provide cultural support. In addition, we recommend that the full array of information collected by UNHCR on each case, including such information as caste identification, should be provided to the resettlement agencies.

We note that at present rates resettlement of the Bhutanese is likely to extend over several years. In order to protect the well-being of this community during this process, and to better prepare them for successful resettlement, we recommend that the US provide the resources necessary to allow Bhutanese children to complete the last two years of high school rather than sitting idle in the camps as is now most often the case. Likewise, support should be given to expand adult English language education programs to all willing learners. We also recommend that health facilities in the camps be improved so that those with serious chronic or acute health conditions do not deteriorate while waiting. Finally, given the easy access to this camp-based population and the eagerness of this community for information, we recommend that consideration be given to expanding the pre-departure cultural orientation program from the present few hours to a more comprehensive course of instruction.

Turning to India, I would like to repeat the concerns mentioned in our testimony of last year. While we note that good progress has been made on the referral and resettlement of Afghan and Chin Burmese cases in Delhi, we remain concerned that groups elsewhere in India, such as the Chin in Mizoram and Tamil refugees from Nepal still have not been given access to the program. The political unrest in Burma last fall coupled with the aftermath of the recent cyclone, and the present military offensive in Sri Lanka underline the fact that return is not a safe option for either of these populations. We again urge that the US work with the government of India to obtain access to these groups so that their resettlement needs can be evaluated.

Similarly, the Rohingya in Bangladesh are a population whose resettlement needs have received too little consideration. Given the deteriorating conditions in Burma, and the continuing indifference of the Burmese government to the humanitarian needs and political rights of its people, we urge that all consideration of repatriation for this group be put on hold, and that the US work with UNHCR to identify vulnerable individuals in this group for resettlement.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to bring our concerns before you today.

