

**STATEMENT OF MITZI SCHROEDER
FOR THE RCUSA MEMBERS OF THE
NEAR EAST SOUTH ASIA WORKING GROUP
(READ BY DAN KOSTEN)**

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

REGARDING THE U.S. REFUGEE PROGRAM FOR FISCAL YEAR 2008

Over the past year, the deterioration of the security situation in Iraq has halted repatriation and accelerated the departure of large numbers of additional refugees, exacerbating the existing refugee crisis. The increasing number seeking refuge in the region has challenged the capacity of neighboring countries to provide asylum. In Syria and Jordan, where the majority of the approximately 2 million Iraqi refugees now reside, the situation of Iraqi “guests” is precarious at best. With no protective legal status, Iraqi refugees are increasingly refused entry at the border. Those who are admitted suffer from access to basic assistance, medical care, shelter and education. Prospects for local integration are extremely poor. Return at present is not an option.

Among the large population requiring international assistance there are several smaller but significant populations with close links to the United States, many of whom have been displaced specifically because of these connections, and others who may have become refugees for other reasons but whose connection to the United States increases their potential danger.

One group that has received considerable recent publicity is that of Iraqi nationals who are former employees of the United States or of US companies and organizations. A second group is Iraqis who are family members of citizens or other legal residents of the United States. We have been assured many times over the past year that PRM and the Department of Homeland Security are in the process of developing programs to identify and process these cases; it is nonetheless a sad fact that too little has been accomplished since our appeal on behalf of these groups at these consultations last year to expedite their resettlement. We repeat the plea made in our previous testimony that these groups receive priority protection.

Beyond these refugees with direct links to the United States there are other vulnerable groups with compelling claims for whom protection is urgently required. These include members of religious and ethnic minorities, women at risk, and separated children, among others falling in categories identified by UNHCR as in need of resettlement. We commend the US for accepting for consideration up to 75% of the 4,500 referrals of Iraqi refugees made to date; this number, however, is far too small in view of the needs.

If it is the intention of the United States to continue to rely on UNHCR as the primary source of referral for these kinds of cases, then it is incumbent upon PRM to ensure that UNHCR has the capacity to perform the outreach and assessment necessary to identify people in urgent need. UNHCR should be urged to use innovative tools, such as the vulnerability assessment protocol now being field tested in Bangladesh to identify vulnerable cases as early as possible in the registration process so as to ensure that they receive protection, assistance, and, when

appropriate, resettlement referral in a timely manner. Given the difficulty of identifying the most vulnerable dispersed within an urban setting, however, other alternatives of direct registration, including the NGO registration, should be pursued as well. We are pleased that a training of NGOs for this purpose is planned for June. We request that input from the NGO community, and particularly from those NGOs that have participated in the referral program in other regions, be sought in planning this training.

We would like once again to call attention to the protection needs of refugees and persecuted Iraqis still within Iraq. The State Department's program announcement of April 2005 relating to policy toward Iraqi refugees allows for in-country processing of at-risk individuals. We urge that Iraqis in immediate danger due to their association with the United States within Iraq, and refugees of other nationalities in Iraq caught up in the present civil unrest, be processed for resettlement in-country. If security concerns make face to face interviews of these individuals problematic, the introduction of innovative approaches such as the use of video conferencing should be considered.

Palestinian refugees presently or until recently residing in Iraq who have been especially targeted for violence and who have been denied access to asylum in the region are of special concern. The decision of several countries, including Chile, to resettle small numbers of Palestinians is a welcome development, as is the US decision to consider resettlement of a few individual cases. The US must exert its leadership, first to provide protection to these Palestinians either in situ or at a transit facility where their safety and dignity can be insured, and second to assist UNHCR in every way to attain a satisfactory durable solution for this population.

The need for a vigorous response to the Iraqi refugee crisis should not cause other refugee situations in the region to be forgotten. The increasing isolation of the Iranian regime poses heightened perils for Iranian religious minorities. The lifeline for departure provided by the Vienna program must be maintained, and the 'fast track' program for Baha'i in Turkey should continue. Elsewhere in the region, we reiterate our concern for the well being of the Somali and Oromo populations in Yemen and the Sudanese and other African refugees in Egypt.

Moving beyond the Middle East to South Asia, we are pleased that the long hoped for resettlement of the Bhutanese in Nepal is set to go forward. We urge that processing of this population begin on a significant scale, so as to reassure the government of Nepal and the refugees themselves that this represents a meaningful part of the solution of their long-term displacement, and so as to encourage wide participation.

Since the US intervention in Afghanistan there has been a massive return of refugees to their homeland. A very large population of Afghans nonetheless remains in Pakistan, the vast majority of whom are not considered to be candidates for resettlement. There do exist, however small numbers of vulnerable individuals who can neither return home nor survive in safety in Pakistan. The US should urge UNHCR to continue to refer such individuals for resettlement when this protection is required. With the present resurgence of Taliban activity, the US should also remain open to the possible need for resettlement of newly displaced refugees.

India continues to remain a problematic country of asylum for a wide variety of refugees. The recent referrals by UNHCR of Afghan and Burmese Chin refugees have been welcome, but other groups, such as the Chin in Mizoram and Sri Lankan Tamils displaced to India by the recent breakdown of the ceasefire in that country are of concern. The US should work diplomatically with the Indian government to obtain access for UNHCR to these underserved caseloads so that an assessment of their resettlement needs can be undertaken.