

Testimony of
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on behalf of
Migration and Refugee Service/U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
on
FY 2009 U.S. Refugee Program
Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration
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I am Sara Feldman, policy advisor for Migration and Refugee Services of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops (MRS/USCCB). I would like to speak today on Iraqi refugees, unaccompanied minors, and other special refugee populations.

Iraqi Refugees

The situation of Iraqi refugees in the Middle East has been well documented and we appreciate the efforts to date of the State Department to provide durable solutions for this population. However, the United States must do more to prevent a potential crisis with this population, as many Iraqis have spent what little resources they have and increasingly are in need of basic assistance.

As we know, the State Department pledged to try to resettle 7,000 Iraqi refugees in FY 2007 and 12,000 refugees during FY 2008. We believe that these target goals are insufficient to the need. We had recommended that at least 25,000 refugees be resettled in 2007 with significant increases for this fiscal year.

As of March, the UNHCR had referred approximately 24,000 cases to the United States for consideration for resettlement. However, during the current fiscal year only 4742 have been resettled in the United States. Last fiscal year, the United States resettled 1,608 refugees out of a target of 7,000.

The reality is that the needs of Iraqi refugees require that the United States resettle many times the 12,000 pledged for this year. Currently, at least 1,000 refugees enter Syria each month, so the 12,000 target merely maintains the status quo and does not relieve pressure on the host countries. In our estimation, the United States must resettle, at a minimum, 60,000 refugees each year in order to improve the situation. This is a conservative estimate, as UNHCR called for the resettlement of 80,000-90,000 out of Syria alone this year.

We are capable of meeting this number, but it would require a larger commitment of diplomatic and financial resources. In fact, there is precedence in U.S. history for staging a large resettlement program for specific populations. For example, in 1975, near the end of the Vietnam War the United States resettled close to 135,000 Vietnamese refugees. During the Orderly Departure Program (ODP) in 1992, at least 10,000 persons were interviewed and processed each month. These efforts helped saved thousands of lives. In response to the refugee crisis in Kosovo, the United States processed and admitted over 14,000 refugees within a six-month period.

It is clear that, given the political will, the United States could significantly increase resettlement numbers for Iraqi refugees. For our part and that of other nonprofit resettlement agencies, we are prepared to handle such a caseload. Without a renewed and stronger commitment to Iraqi resettlement, vulnerable groups, including women at risk, children, and the elderly, will continue

to languish in fear, with no hope for the future. I submit the following recommendations to improve the resettlement options for Iraqis:

- The United States must vastly increase its commitment to resettlement of Iraqis. The number of 12,000 refugees in one fiscal year equals roughly the number of refugees continuing to arrive in Syria. The UNHCR recommendation for resettlement from Syria has approached 80,000 people per year. To accomplish this goal, the US and the UNHCR will need to demonstrate to the Syrian government exactly what is required in terms of infrastructure, including the number of caseworkers and interviewing officers required.
- The United States must implement more aggressively the authority granted by legislation for refugees that are members of certain groups. A major outreach campaign must be launched.
- The UNHCR in Jordan should make resettlement available to any interested registered refugees, rather than undertaking an intensive review of cases on an individual basis. With at least 500,000 Iraqi refugees in Jordan, more must be done to relieve the pressure on the government and Jordanian society.
- Other avenues for refugee identification must be pursued. The U.S. government has held only one training for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) involved in assistance work to help them to refer refugees for resettlement. This method involves taking people who already have full time jobs and asking them to take on another responsibility. The United States should directly fund several NGO resettlement outreach projects designed to help vulnerable refugees, as the current system does not reach these refugees, who are often not able to come to the UNHCR office for multiple appointments.
- Refugees who have paid ransoms when their relatives were kidnapped should receive expedited waivers for ‘material support’. The process for obtaining these exemptions continues to take too much time and should be streamlined.
- Attention needs to be paid to each stage of the processing of Iraqi refugees to ensure that all steps are completed as quickly as possible. This includes preparation of cases for interview, fingerprints, medical examinations, etc.

Other Vulnerable Refugee Populations

We would like to call attention to a few other refugee populations in need of attention by the United States. These are in addition to populations highlighted by Refugee Council USA.

In terms of the Iraqi refugee population, there are two sub-groups that need special attention: Christian minorities and Palestinians.

The Catholic Church has a special interest in ensuring that Christian minorities in Iraq, such as the Chaldeans and Assyrians, are protected, with the goal of repatriation to Iraq in the near

future. However, there are cases in which return to Iraq is not recommended and resettlement is the best option. These are cases in which family members have been killed or direct threats have been made to individuals or families because of their religious affiliation. They cannot be guaranteed safety, even with a new government in Iraq.

We also are concerned with Palestinian Iraqis who have been denied entry into Syria and are languishing in the Al Tanaf camp on the Syria-Iraq border. They live in horrible and life threatening conditions and should not be left to languish, at risk of their lives.

Finally, we call to your attention the situation of the Burmese Rohingya refugees, located largely in southeast Bangladesh, near the border with Burma. As many of 30,000 refugees continue to live in camps operated by UNHCR, the last group who fled brutal oppression in 1991-92 in Northern Arakan State.

This group has been unable to integrate into Bangladesh successfully. While a repatriation agreement has recently been announced, reports from inside Burma suggest that it is still unsafe for them to return, notwithstanding the devastation from the recent cyclone. MRS/USCCB believes that the United States should make the Rohingya a priority for resettlement in 2009.

The Plight Unaccompanied Refugee Minors

Together with Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, we remain concerned about the plight of separated and unaccompanied refugee children (URMs). URMs are defined as children who are not currently living with their parents or primary care givers. Children living without the protection of their parents have greater vulnerabilities even than other refugees. The lack of adequate protection also increases the potential that refugee children become victims of human trafficking.

The current system of protection within UNHCR and the US Refugee Program (USRP) is improving but needs continued attention and more improvement. The establishment of Vulnerable Minors Working Group between RCUSA and PRM is an excellent and helpful step. Because of the workgroup discussions, we have seen improvement in overseas processing and fewer unaccompanied child cases being lost because of arrival after age 18. More, of course, remains to be done.

UNHCR estimates that 3-5 percent of refugee flows are unaccompanied (not including separated) minors, a number which has remained remarkably consistent over many years. However, the number of unaccompanied children offered the protection of resettlement by USRP in FY 05 was approximately 42; a negligible percent of the possible number who may need this protection and less than a fraction of a percent of the 53,813 refugees resettled in the U.S. in the same fiscal year.

In fiscal year 2006 and fiscal year 2007, little new progress was made to identify and resettle unaccompanied minors, with only 62 resettled in 2006 and 64 in 2007. This has occurred despite the presence of such minors throughout the globe.

For example, the United States has not resettled any such children from the Iraqi refugee population, despite their presence. Earlier this year, MRS/USCCB, along with the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), issued a report that indicated that unaccompanied children make up as much as 1 percent of the Iraqi refugee population in Syria.

Unaccompanied minors also make up a portion of the Burmese population in Thailand and Malaysia, as we have reported in the past. We applaud the State Department's attention to this vulnerable group and look forward to welcoming 250 Burmese youth, primarily from Malaysia, to the United States this year.

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 minors worldwide and insist that durable solutions should be found for them as soon as possible. NGOs particularly should be encouraged to step forward to refer vulnerable children to the State Dept for protection.

One of the goals of working with unaccompanied children is to facilitate family reunification whenever possible. However, the current design of the Priority 3 family reunification process for the U.S. actually inhibits children who have been resettled from achieving this goal. Often we find that surviving family members of URMs may in fact be siblings and not parents. We strongly feel that the current Priority system needs to be adjusted to allow URMs resettled in this country to file for siblings or other close relatives.

In the same way, we are concerned for those children who are left behind in refugee camps and other countries of asylum when their parents are resettled in the United States. Often left in the hands of extended families to care for them, their whereabouts are unknown at the time of initial resettlement.

Recommendations:

- We support continued efforts to improve overseas processing so that the particularly vulnerable unaccompanied and separated refugee children can be protected.
- Within the Priority 3 processing system, we recommend that the system be made more flexible so that unaccompanied children may sponsor siblings and other relatives if they can be found. Often siblings may be their closest living relatives.
- We encourage PRM to reexamine its system for identifying vulnerable minors so that the numbers identified and served comes closer to the probable numbers who need our nation's help.
- We support continued enhancement of NGOs ability to identify and refer vulnerable minors for consideration by the USRP.

- We support the concept of Rapid Response Teams which should include child specialists who can assist in identifying and recommending protection for vulnerable minors in refugee situations.

In conclusion, MRS/USCCB supports the views given today by Refugee Council USA.

Thank you for your consideration of our views.