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Who Is a Terrorist?  
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One of the trickier battles in the war on terror has been the legal identification of friends and enemies. Under current U.S. law, people who provide "material support" to terrorists are deemed terrorists themselves -- even if the groups they're helping are freedom fighters, agitating for causes that the U.S. government likes.

This has caused hardships among two worthy peoples to whom the U.S. owes a debt of gratitude: Hmong refugees from Laos and Montagnards from Vietnam. The Hmong and the Montagnard fought honorably alongside GIs in the Vietnam War. After the Americans pulled out, many were accepted as refugees in the U.S.; others fled back to the hills, where they are still persecuted. Then September 11 happened, U.S. law changed, and they were suddenly dubbed "terrorists."

This week, after years of lobbying by Republicans and Democrats, the State Department waived the terrorist label for Hmongs and Montagnards who had provided "material support." That lets them apply for asylum, or if they're already in the U.S., for permanent residency. Similar waivers have been issued to members of Burma's Chin, Karen and Karenni ethnic groups -- and others, like Cuba's Alzados -- who provided "material support" to fighters trying to topple repressive governments.

Nongovernmental organizations estimate the waivers could help at least 400 asylum seekers in the U.S. and abroad. More than 6,200 Burmese, Hmong and other refugees who were already given asylum -- and then saw their status change when the law changed in 2005 -- could now get their green cards.

This week's decision won't help the freedom fighters, whom the law still dubs terrorists. But Congress is working on the problem. Senators Norm Coleman and Jon Kyl, both Republicans, and Patrick Leahy, a Democrat, have tucked a clause into a bill that would let the government pardon both freedom fighters and those who gave them material support.

While the clause wouldn't change the definition of a terrorist, it would give the U.S. administration the ability to right wrongs, when they occur.