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## **To Protect Refugees, Amend Laws**

By THOMAS WENSKI

Policies designed to protect us from terrorists should not penalize those who have been victimized.

Political upheavals throughout the world, including the conflict in Iraq, continue to create refugees. The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants in their 2006 World Refugee Survey estimates that numbers have grown to some 12 million. These numbers are not just statistics, refugees are flesh-and-blood people: men and women, boys and girls.

The United States has always provided a haven to those fleeing political and religious persecution. Prior to the tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001, almost 90,000 refugees were resettled in the United States yearly.

Refugee admissions dropped precipitously in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 because of heightened security concerns. Fortunately, as these concerns were addressed, admissions have continued to grow, though not yet to equal pre-2001 levels. However, the expansive national security laws enacted post-9/11 are also having the unintended effect of denying sanctuary to thousands of innocent refugees who themselves, in many cases, have been victims of terrorism.

The Patriot Act and REAL ID Act exclude anyone from entering our country that has provided "material support" to a terrorist organization. On its face, such a requirement sounds reasonable. Yet, no distinction is made between those who might have willingly and knowingly supported a terrorist organization, and those who, because of duress or intimidation, might have been forced to provide some material assistance to a "terrorist" group.

The U.N. high commissioner for refugees estimates that at least 70 percent of Colombian refugees normally eligible for referral to the United States have been denied consideration for resettlement here because they had been forced to make payments to the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) or other insurgent groups that have terrorized the country for decades. These Colombians, which include victims of extortion and kidnapping, now are effectively told that their victimization makes them ineligible for political asylum to the U.S.

As presently written and enforced, those who were threatened into giving a meal to terrorists are treated no differently than those who voluntarily joined armed groups.

These laws also label as "terrorists" those who may have been legitimate, if irregular, combatants in struggles supported at one time by U.S. policies. For example, 1960s era anti-Castro Cuban freedom fighters are barred from U.S. citizenship by these new laws. Likewise, Hmong, Montagnards and other ethnic minorities who fought alongside U.S. forces during the Vietnam War are now told that they have no place in our country. Courageous individuals supporting pro-democracy groups resisting the military junta in Burma and other oppressive regimes have also been denied asylum here.

More than 600 asylum seekers from countries where regimes or violent groups terrorize religious and ethnic minorities have had their cases placed on hold, according to government statistics and human rights reports. Another 700 refugees who have previously been granted refugee status in our country have had their requests for permanent residency placed in limbo.

The delays have left many families separated for years. Of particular concern are refugee children left in degrading and dangerous conditions, awaiting permanent resettlement and reunion with surviving family members.

While the U.S. government has recently granted visa waivers for some affected refugees, such a patchwork approach is insufficient. The administration and the new Congress should do all they can to fix these glitches in these "national security laws." This is not a partisan or ideological issue.

Conservatives and liberals, people of faith and secular humanitarian organizations, all can agree that policies designed to protect us from terrorists should not penalize those who have been victimized themselves by terrorists.

The Catholic Church through the USCCB's Migration and Refugee Services, along with other religious and humanitarian agencies, since the post-World War II era, have cooperated with the U.S. government in making our system of successfully resettling refugees admired around the world. To allow bureaucratic glitches to lock out deserving refugees desperately seeking a more hopeful future would be a blot on this noble legacy.

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