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Agence France Presse -- English
September 28, 2006 Thursday 9:20 AM GMT
LENGTH: 332 words

HEADLINE: Under US law, refugees may be deemed terrorists: rights groups

DATELINE: WASHINGTON, Sept 28 2006

BODY:

Too often, refugees seeking asylum in the United States are considered terrorists and turned away under restrictive post-September 11 policies, human rights and refugee support groups told US lawmakers.

"Legislation is needed to allow a distinction between actual terrorists who are a security threat to our nation and refugees who have been forced to defend their families and their freedom from oppressors," Refugee Council USA vice chairman Kenneth Gavin testified Wednesday to a Senate subcommittee on immigration.

He said that under the USA Patriot Act and the Real ID Act passed after the 2001 attacks on the United States, anybody is considered a terrorist who lends "material support" to a terrorist organization.

"The law is applied to refugees who have been members or supporters of organizations whose activities fall within the scope of self defense against brutal governments condemned by the US," he added.

"Examples include Montagnards (Vietnamese) and Hmong (Laotians) who supported the US military during the Vietnam War, and Cubans who supported anti-communist movements," added Gavin, who also directs the Jesuit Refugee Service.

Also excluded, he said, are Colombians blackmailed by paramilitary groups because they are deemed supporters of terrorism.

Michael Horowitz, of the Hudson Institute's project for civil justice reform, said "the 'material support' and terrorist organization issues ... (are) based not on genuine security concerns but on a facts-be-damned anti-immigration hostility."

Representing the US government, assistant Secretary of State for refugee matters Ellen Sauerbrey recognized the need "to restore the necessary balance between national security concerns and our nation's legacy as a refuge for the persecuted."

For 2006, the United States has accepted some 41,500 refugees, more than the 30,000 per year it allowed in the two years following the September 11 attacks, but significantly less than between 1980 and 2001, when the yearly average was 98,000.