



WE URGE CONGRESS AND THE WHITE HOUSE: DO NOT DENY REFUGE TO VICTIMS OF TERRORISM

*Statement from Gideon Aronoff, President and CEO,
HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society
March 9, 2007*

In an absurd twist, America's anti-terrorism laws are now being used to deny protection to refugees fleeing some of the most brutal regimes and violent conflicts on earth.

While measures to prevent terrorists from being supported, and to keep their supporters out, are critically important, the American government is using the material support provision to exclude victims of terrorism – including those whose very struggle to be free now makes them inadmissible to the United States. Shockingly, under today's laws Jews who bravely resisted Nazi terror and survived to tell about it would have faced exclusion when they sought refuge in the United States.

Both Congress and the Administration have a role in fixing this problem. The Administration can do much more to ensure that bona fide refugees are not barred from the U.S. by using all the tools it already has under current law to waive material support in appropriate cases. Right now, the Administration can and should consider the claims of refugees and asylum who claim they were coerced under duress to provide "support" to a terrorist group. Under the Administration's recent policy change, victims of terrorism may be able to assert duress claims, *unless they were victimized by a group which the U.S. has formally designated as a terrorist group*. As a result, the victims of some the worst terrorist groups in the world remain barred from showing that they are not supporters but are instead victims of terrorism.

Colombians who have paid ransom to obtain the release of a kidnapped loved one are still considered by the American government to be supporters of terrorism. Women from Sierra Leone and other countries where rebel forces frequently use rape and torture to coerce their victims into providing household services and other forms of "support" will likewise not be helped by the Administration's recent change in policy.

In the meantime, this problem will not be solved until Congress acts to change the law. Without a change in the law, Burmese refugees who are viciously repressed by the Burmese regime, Hmong refugees from Laos who were ardent supporters of the American government during the Vietnam War, and other groups who bravely resisted oppression will continue to be denied admission to the United States.

President Bush has repeatedly expressed the view that the American refugee program reflects our finest humanitarian tradition. To honor this tradition, Congress and the Administration must both do their part to exempt legitimate refugees from the material support bar where the support provided has been coerced under duress, or where it is otherwise clear that the refugees seeking the protection of the United States are not supporters of terrorism and are in fact victims of tyranny and oppression.

The material support bar is an unintended consequence of anti-terrorism laws that continues to be overbroadly applied to eligible refugees who are, in fact, victims of terrorism. It is critical that Congress and the White House act now to reverse this policy so as to ensure that refugees in need of protection are not unfairly barred from admission to the U.S.