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October 3, 2006

The Honorable Joseph Pitts  
221 Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Congressman Pitts:

We write to express our strong support for your legislation, H.R. 5918, a bi-partisan bill that will protect vulnerable refugees from being erroneously denied protection as a result of an overly broad interpretation of the “material support” bar on refugees and asylum seekers. Refugee Council USA (RCUSA) is a coalition of 23 refugee, human rights, and humanitarian organizations committed to the protection of refugees. Our organizations have decades of experience assisting and protecting the world’s most vulnerable people. We believe your legislation is urgently needed in order to ensure that victims of political and religious persecution are protected. We urge its swift passage.

Right now thousands of innocent refugees who pose no threat to our nation are being denied the protection of U.S. refugee resettlement and asylum programs. Unless Congress acts many of the world’s most vulnerable people risk being returned to persecution by the oppressive regimes from which they fled.

This injustice is an unintended consequence of a provision in the immigration law which bars from refugee and asylum protection anyone who gave “material support” to a “terrorist organization.” The law was intended to exclude from admission to the United States those who make common cause with terrorists. Unfortunately the overly broad definitions of “terrorist organization” and “material support” have, in practice, worked to exclude from protection innocent and deserving refugees, including those who have struggled against repression in their home countries and even *victims* of terrorist groups. The terms in the law are being interpreted so broadly that even the United States Military would constitute a “terrorist organization” whenever it enters the territory of another state uninvited.

This surely is not what Congress intended. Your legislation seeks to clarify that intention with two narrow amendments to the law. First, H.R. 5918 would specify that only those groups whose activities threaten the security of United States nationals or the national security of the United States qualify as “terrorist organizations” for purposes of the material support bar. This would ensure that refugees who were, for example, involved with anti-Communist or pro-democracy groups supported by the United States, including groups of Hmong and Montagnards who assisted our military during the Vietnam War, are not excluded from protection. Second, your legislation makes clear that innocent refugees who were forced through undue coercion or duress to provide goods or services to armed groups should not be considered to have supported terrorism. This will remedy unjust and



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illogical consequences of the current law under which, for example, women who have been raped by armed militias and forced to accompany them as servants are barred from refugee status as having provided “material support” for terrorism.

United States law rightly bars those who engage in terrorism from admission to this country, and H.R. 5918 would in no way affect the security and other terrorism-related bars on admission to the United States. Anyone who has ever engaged in terrorist activities, espoused terrorism, incited terrorism, received military training from a designated terrorist organization, associated with, represented or joined a terrorist organization, or willingly supported a terrorist organization will continue to be barred entry to the United States. H.R. 5918 would not alter these provisions.

America can protect its security while remaining faithful to its principles. Offering protection to victims of oppression and terror defines us as a nation and is an important foreign policy objective of the United States. Current law unnecessarily impedes this objective. Swift passage of H.R. 5918 will remedy the unintended consequences of the material support bar and ensure that innocent refugees who pose no danger to the United States are eligible for protection here.

Thank you for your leadership on this important legislation. We stand ready to assist in any way possible with its passage.

Sincerely,

C. Richard Parkins  
Chair, Refugee Council USA  
Director, Episcopal Migration Ministries

*On behalf of the following organizations:*

Joseph Roberson, Director  
***Church World Service/Immigration and Refugee Program***

C. Richard Parkins, Director  
***Episcopal Migration Ministries***

Tsehaye Teferra, PhD, President  
***Ethiopian Community Development Council***



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Eleanor Acer, Director, Asylum Program  
***Human Rights First***

Johan Ketelers, Secretary General  
***International Catholic Migration Commission***

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