

August 24, 2006

The Honorable George W. Bush  
President of the United States  
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. President,

As leaders of faith-based communities and individuals concerned with protecting victims of persecution, we ask to meet with you and urge you to directly intervene in a situation that is barring thousands of refugees and asylum seekers, some of the world's most vulnerable and oppressed people, from gaining the protection offered by the U.S. refugee resettlement and asylum programs.

All refugees endure extreme hardship and suffering and for some, their only hope for rebuilding their lives is to resettle in the United States. However, the U.S. has mistakenly characterized many of these refugees as having aided terrorists when they in fact were often the victims of terrorism. For example, a Christian Burmese Chin refugee who was interrogated and beaten by the Burmese military, a Sierra Leonean woman refugee who was raped repeatedly by rebels and saw her daughter attacked in front of her, a Montagnard refugee who fought alongside our troops in Vietnam, and a Colombian father who paid a ransom to obtain the release of his son are all refugees who have been refused resettlement to the U.S. due to a grossly misconstrued interpretation by the Department of Homeland Security of what constitutes "material support to a terrorist organization."

There is a process by which a waiver can be applied to allow certain groups of refugees to come to the U.S. who would otherwise be denied under this overbroad definition of "material support." However, this waiver has only been exercised once, and for only one group of Burmese refugees in one of eight refugee camps in Thailand. Furthermore, it took nine months of interagency deliberations to reach this limited result which is so narrow that it excludes hundreds of refugees inside the camp who are deserving of resettlement and thousands more who face extremely precarious situations in some of the world's most troubled regions. Just recently, twenty five Burmese refugees including two women in advanced stages of pregnancy were detained and sent into the hands of human traffickers after the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees suspended referrals from Malaysia to the U.S. resettlement program due to the material support bar.

The current situation in which refugees are being denied the protection offered by the U.S. resettlement program runs contrary to your long-standing agenda of freedom and democracy for oppressed people all over the world and undermines the efforts of the Department of State to provide resettlement as a durable solution to refugees in need of protection. The Department of State, the Department of Justice, and the Department of Homeland Security have not placed due urgency on resolving this issue, sending a message to the world that we no longer stand with those who have been oppressed by the very regimes we oppose. Thus we ask for your direct intervention so that current implementation of the law can correspond with the intent of the law and the foreign and domestic policy objectives of the White House.

The present interpretation of the material support bar has effectively altered U.S. policy so that refugees and asylum seekers who have suffered at the hands of terrorists and despotic regimes are now no longer welcome to the U.S. as our friends. Your leadership is needed at this critical juncture so our country can be a place of freedom for those who are persecuted all over the world. Refugees cannot become the unintended victims of the war against terrorism.

We ask to meet with you concerning this grave situation and look forward to your response.

Respectfully,

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President  
American Values

Most Reverend Gerald R. Barnes  
Bishop of San Bernardino  
Chairman, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Migration

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