

Testimony of
Mr. Arthur Dewey

February 12, 2002

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee:

It is a distinct pleasure to appear before you today in my new role as Assistant Secretary of State in the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration. It has been 15 years since I last served in the Bureau - then as Deputy Assistant Secretary when the Bureau was known as "Refugee Programs" or "RP." In the meantime, I have remained engaged in several critical refugee issues: serving as the Deputy United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Director of the Congressional Hunger Center, and as a consultant with the U.S. military to ensure that humanitarian assistance considerations are factored into post-Cold War military training.

While most of my professional focus has been on the humanitarian relief side of the refugee portfolio, I have always been proud of our country's leadership role in refugee resettlement. Whenever the need has arisen for the United States to step forward and extend its welcome to refugees in need of our protection and the opportunity for a new life in freedom, we have never let them down. Upon returning to the Department, I am pleased to find that, with President Bush's strong support for immigration, the commitment to a vibrant admissions program in which refugees receive the highest quality of resettlement services remains intact. In the year 2000, of the 37,000 UNHCR-referred refugees offered permanent resettlement in third countries around the world, the United States accepted 25,000 - a clear demonstration of our leadership in this field.

Something that has changed dramatically during my absence from the Department is the degree to which our admissions program has become decidedly more diverse. During the 1980's, our refugee admissions program was overwhelmingly focused on refugees from Indochina. During the early 1990's, religious minorities from the New Independent States of the former Soviet Union became the dominant group. By the mid-1990's, the number of persons in need of resettlement from these two areas declined. At the same time, the U.S. began to coordinate its admissions program more closely with other resettlement countries and with UNHCR. As a result, last year we processed members of 77 nationality groups in a comparable number of processing locations around the world. We are now truly global in our commitment to refugee resettlement. Our country also continues to lead the world in its commitment of resources

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to all major international relief organizations providing life-sustaining humanitarian assistance to refugees in desperate circumstances.

Prior to the tragedy of September 11, we determined in consultation with our partners in the NGO community that the current fiscal year would be one of consolidation for the resettlement program. We recognized that the cost of providing a dignified welcome for arriving refugees was

exceeding the available public-private funding and that the quality of refugee reception was suffering as a result. The Department substantially increased the amount of government resources available for each refugee in combination with the continued commitment of private resources to this important humanitarian undertaking.

As is well known, the shock of September 11 had a dramatic impact on the admissions program. The Presidential Determination of the number of admissions for FY 2002 was delayed pending completion of our review of the program's security-related aspects. The admission and interviewing of refugees overseas was suspended as the Department of State and all the other government agencies involved in admissions processing addressed very legitimate security concerns regarding adequate screening of refugee applicants. To this end, we worked diligently with the Department of Justice, the National Security Council and the intelligence community to develop reasonable procedures for safeguarding the security of the American public and the integrity of the refugee admissions program. In implementing these measures we balanced the security imperative with our commitment to providing resettlement to those in need of protection. To do less could undermine long-term public support for the program.

With our enhanced security procedures in place since late November, my staff is working closely with other government agencies and non-governmental partners to facilitate the processing and admission of as many refugees as possible during this fiscal year. We are greatly encouraged by INS Commissioner Ziglar's commitment of greater resources to the task at hand, and have every intention of doing our part to come as close as possible to reaching the President's authorized ceiling of 70,000 refugee admissions this fiscal year.

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The steps we have taken include authorizing the hiring of additional staff at several overseas processing locations to implement new security requirements. We have also assumed all pre-screening tasks in Moscow, freeing INS officials to carry out other urgent and pressing duties. To expedite medical screening, we have authorized the International Organization of Migration to conduct most refugee medical examinations in Africa, where the remote location of refugee camps and other logistical complications often delayed processing. Our overseas refugee coordinators are working with UNHCR field staff throughout the world to identify refugee populations in need of resettlement. As a result, while only 800 refugees arrived in December (compared to almost 15,000 in the first quarter of FY 2001), we were able to admit 2,000 in January and over 3,000 are scheduled to arrive in February.

But we still have a long way to go. The United States of America sustained a tremendous blow on September 11. The refugee admissions program was hard hit in the aftermath as we made the difficult adjustments to assure its integrity and to ensure our security as a nation. Nonetheless, even in the context of the current war, this Administration remains committed to keeping the door open to refugees.

We have a tremendous challenge before us - to bring in as many of the 70,000 authorized refugees as we can, being mindful of the reduction in funds for the Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) account for FY 2002, and of continuing large assistance needs overseas. I want to assure you, Mr. Chairman, that we have the funding necessary to meet that goal. The challenge will continue into FY 2003 as we maintain our efforts to implement the enhanced

security requirements, to protect the integrity of the program, and to improve the quality of refugee reception once services in the United States.

In closing, I want to assure the Committee that the Bush Administration is committed to a refugee program that will be responsible as well as responsive and generous, maintaining U.S. leadership in this important humanitarian endeavor. Accepting refugees for permanent resettlement manifests the best traditions and the compassion of the American people, incidentally burnishing the image of this country in a way that also advances our foreign policy.

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Once the refugees are within our borders, it quickly becomes clear that their activities, and those of other immigrants who have made this country their own, contribute immensely to the cultural and economic vitality of this nation. There could scarcely be a better or more fitting reward for this exercise of the best of our American traditions and for the work of the State Department and all of the other agencies involved.

I look forward to your questions.