

Testimony of

The Honorable Patrick Leahy

February 12, 2002

More than ever after the tragic events of September 11, we must maintain our commitment to refugees. Our refugee policies show our nation at its best, and we need to preserve them. I would like to thank Senator Kennedy for holding this hearing and emphasizing that point, and Senator Brownback for making this Committee's dedication to refugees truly bipartisan.

I was pleased when the President announced last fall that the United States would accept 70,000 refugees in FY 2002, because it confirmed that our nation would not allow the terrorist attacks to interfere with our commitments to provide a home for people fleeing persecution and chaos throughout the world. I understood when refugee interviews slowed to a near halt after September 11 due to the removal of U.S. government personnel from various troubled regions of the world, and I agreed with the need to develop additional security mechanisms before admitting refugees, to ensure that no terrorist could abuse the admissions process. But I have been concerned by some of the conflicting signals being sent by different parts of the Administration, and I hope this hearing will assure the Committee that the President's directive to admit 70,000 refugees will be realized.

Not long after the President announced his directive, others in the executive branch suggested that it was impossible to meet. The State Department made plans to admit only 50,000 refugees, and the Immigration and Naturalization Service did not have its normal complement of officers dedicated to conducting screening interviews. I joined with Senators Kennedy and Brownback in writing last month to INS Commissioner Ziglar and Secretary of State Powell to urge them to take the steps necessary. More recently, there have been encouraging signs from both the INS and the State Department. I was heartened by Commissioner Ziglar's address to the National Immigration Forum earlier this month, in which he said he would be detailing "a significant number of INS personnel to conduct refugee interviews worldwide with a goal of meeting 70,000 admissions this year." That is the right goal, and I thank Commissioner Ziglar for expressing it so publicly and for joining us today to discuss it. Similarly, the State Department has recently suggested that it too is committed to the task.

Our refugee program shows our nation's commitment to the dispossessed and persecuted, and our continued dedication to it after the September 11 attacks shows that we will not sacrifice our ideals. Especially in these uncertain times, other nations may follow our lead if we scale back our commitments. I know there are now many logistical hurdles to overcome in implementing the program, but I am confident that our experts at the State Department and INS can get the job done.

We must remember that there are thousands of desperate people in refugee camps around the world - including refugees from Afghanistan - waiting for the promise of a new life in America. There are also thousands of Americans, many in my State of Vermont, who stand ready to help

these refugees adjust to life in the United States. This is a system that has worked in the past and will work in the future - preserving it is worth extraordinary effort, and I hope to hear today that the Administration intends to mount such an effort in the coming months.

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