

Testimony of

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"OVERSIGHT OF U.S. REFUGEE PROGRAM"

BEFORE THE
SUBCOMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION, BORDER SECURITY
AND CITIZENSHIP SENATE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Subcommittee:

I am honored to have this opportunity to discuss the President's proposal for refugee admissions in Fiscal Year 2005 and the role of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) in the United States Refugee Program. As you have heard me say previously, refugee issues hold a special place in my heart. I know what it is like to be a refugee because I was one.

Forty-two years ago, I came to this land of freedom and opportunity as a 15 year-old unaccompanied minor from Cuba. I arrived with no family, no money, and no working knowledge of the English language. I was welcomed and cared for by charitable organizations that provided support and guidance to me as I began my new life in the United States. I would like to offer my personal thanks to those organizations that continue to provide a warm welcome to refugees arriving today.

I followed in the footsteps of millions of others who have come to America from other countries in search of freedom, in search of opportunity, in search of a better life. I found all three, for which I am grateful beyond words. Having realized my version of the American dream, it is poignantly gratifying for me to lead an organization that plays a critical role in offering a new home and a brighter future to individuals who have fled persecution.

Some may find it remarkable that, as an immigrant, I would be in charge of the United States immigration services. Instead of remarkable, I think it simply underscores the fact that naturalized citizens in the United States are not second-class citizens. Native born or naturalized, as Americans we shoulder the same rights and responsibilities.

I share Assistant Secretary Dewey's pleasure in being able to report good news to you today. After two years of low numbers of refugee arrivals, admissions in FY 2004 will exceed the

allocated level of 50,000. This year's admission of the allocated levels and some of the reserve reflects the hard work, adaptability and commitment of governmental, nongovernmental, and international organizations, all partners in the refugee program.

This past year, USCIS deployed nearly 140 temporary duty officers on 60-day assignments overseas to supplement our refugee adjudicators permanently stationed abroad. Our officers conducted refugee status interviews of over 70,000 individuals in nearly 50 locations for applicants from at least 60 nations.

Two new programs that have been noteworthy in this year are those focusing on the resettlement of Meskhetian Turks in Russia and Lao Hmong in Thailand. Our officers interviewing the first Meskhetian Turks in Krasnodar, Russia have reported the very compelling refugee claims presented by members of this group. We are also pleased that we were able to contribute to the very expeditious processing of approximately 15,000 Hmong refugees.

Among other indicators of a successful year, FY 2004 admissions reflect the program's increased responsiveness to vulnerable refugees in need of resettlement. While, ten years ago, fewer than 6,000 African refugees were admitted to the United States, this year more than 28,000 African refugees will be admitted. Our officers conducted eligibility interviews in 18 different African countries, often processing in remote locations.

It is indeed a positive development that the refugee program has become more diverse with small at-risk populations processed in more locations. This shift in focus, however, presents new challenges, perhaps the most difficult being the need to balance national security concerns with humanitarian objectives. Although the use of temporary duty officers has allowed USCIS to meet its refugee processing responsibilities to date, the complexity of refugee adjudications in the wake of September 11 calls for officers with sustained overseas processing experience who have developed regional expertise.

I therefore am pleased to announce that we have begun the work necessary for the hiring and deployment of a dedicated corps of refugee officers in FY 2005. This new cadre of specially trained officers, funded through the examinations fee account, will improve the quality of refugee adjudications, enhance our ability to combat fraud and screen for national security risks, and fulfill the humanitarian objectives of the refugee program.

The mission of USCIS is to restore public confidence in the integrity of America's immigration services. That is, to provide the right benefit, to the right person, in the right amount of time while preventing the wrong applicant from accessing our benefits. The high priority that USCIS places upon maintaining the integrity of our programs reaches throughout the organization. We have recently created an Office of Fraud Detection and National Security within USCIS to coordinate activities addressing benefits fraud. We also will continue to work closely with Immigration and Customs Enforcement in cases in which investigations are appropriate.

Our efforts to verify the claimed family relationships of all refugee applicants whose access to an interview is based on an Affidavit of Relationship filed by an anchor relative in the United States (commonly known as Priority 3 or P-3) are continuing and have resulted in the identification of numerous cases involving identity fraud and relationship misrepresentation. By adopting a

strong, unequivocal position on fraud, we have been able to ensure that U.S. protection is extended to legitimate refugee applicants while not compromising the security of our nation. Our family relationship reviews will be particularly important in the upcoming year as the number of nationalities eligible for P-3 processing is expanded from 9 to 14, with family members from Cuba, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Haiti and Rwanda added to the list of nationalities eligible to access the U.S. Refugee Program.

In closing, I would like to assure you that, along with my personal commitment to the mission of the U.S. Refugee Program, you also have the commitment of the Department of Homeland Security as well. One-and-one-half years since its creation, refugee issues are a highly visible and important priority within the Department. My hope is that one day freedom and liberty will be enjoyed by all people, and there will no longer be individuals who are forced to flee their homelands due to war or fear of their lives for their political beliefs.

I would be pleased to respond to any questions you may have. Thank you.