

Testimony of
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Congressional Testimony

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Refugees: Seeking Solutions to a Global Concern

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Mr. Chairman, Senator Kennedy, other distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for inviting the US Committee for Refugees to testify today and for convening this most important hearing. Recent events in the Sudan remind us that refugees are the human face of war and that the escape from terror and search for freedom continues today.

The US Committee for Refugees was established in 1958 in response to President Eisenhower's call that a committee be formed to facilitate the United States' participation in the first World Refugee Year, an event that preceded the closure of all refugee camps in Europe. The President expected that ten years after the end of World War II refugees would find a new life - that they would either return home, permanently settle in their country of refuge, or resettle in a third country - that they would find a durable solution to their plight. His leadership was successful and USCR was already advocating on behalf of refugees when the last refugee camp in Europe was burned to the ground.

But it is clear that in the latter part of the 20th Century and the beginning of the 21st, the search for durable solutions has been a failure for the majority of refugees. In our research, published in our 43rd annual World Refugee Survey - the Warehousing Issue, we found that there are 12 million refugees worldwide with no durable solution in sight. And even worse, 7 million of these have been confined to camps or segregated settlements or have been otherwise been deprived of their basic human rights, laid out in the 1951 Refugee Convention, for ten years or more. They live lives of hopeless dependency, dangerous insecurity and endless despair.

USCR recommends a renewed commitment to ensure that refugees are free to exercise their rights, in the absence of a durable solution, as specified in international law. These rights include:

- ? The right to work
- ? Freedom of movement
- ? The right to own property
- ? Basic education

Since USCR began highlighting the warehousing problem and the rights laid out in the Convention, we have had an overwhelmingly positive response. We have developed a sign-on statement against the warehousing of refugees and nearly 100 organizations and notable individuals worldwide have signed on; examples include the Darfur Organization for Human

Rights and Development in Sudan, the Committee in Defense of Democracy and Human Rights in Israel, Nobel laureate Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Stephen Moore, President of the Club for Growth.

Notable academics and the major donor and refugee assistance agencies involved in refugee camp management agreed with us: the warehousing of refugees and denial of basic human rights is wrong, both legally and morally. However, we have been rightfully challenged by our colleagues to develop practical ways of implementing Convention rights for refugees while they are waiting for a permanent solution.

As we develop the next steps, it is important to see the warehousing problem more clearly by listening to refugees and the countries that host them. Abraham, a Sudanese refugee who spent ten years of his young life in Kakuma refugee camp in Kenya says,

'When I arrived in the camp I thought I would be there for a month and then go back home. I arrived when I was twelve years old, and left when I was 22. We could not travel or work outside the camp. So the camp was literally an open-air prison - a storage place where they kept human beings. We suffered the most mentally. We could not predict when this hardship would end. Even prisoners have more rights than refugees. Prisoners know exactly what term they are serving. Refugees serve indefinite terms in the camp. I thought maybe God did not mean for us to live like human beings.'

We asked Abraham what might help change these warehousing conditions. He said,

'Keeping refugees in this condition is not smart for the international community or the Kenyan government. It increases the burden to support refugees. Refugees are not stupid or unproductive. If you give them opportunities, they can help reduce the burden on the host community.' Thanks to the United States Refugee Program, Abraham now lives in Vermont. Yet 88,986 refugees remain in Kakuma refugee camp.

We have also consulted with several host government officials in Africa who responded by noting that if they keep refugees in camps, the international community pays attention to them and provides them with assistance. If refugees were not in camps, they believe donor nations would not help manage the situation. The critical role that host country governments play in securing refugee rights must be considered by the international community at the onset of a refugee emergency, not only after years of seeking elusive solutions. The deprivation of refugee rights for any length of time is a tragedy.

USCR is investigating whether current conditions in Chad indicate 'warehousing in the making'. With ongoing conflict in Darfur and the establishment of camp management systems along the border region, we have to ask ourselves, "Who is preparing the government of Chad to engage with the refugee community in the long-term, to recognize the rights refugees have under the Convention to live as free people?" We are afraid the answer is no one but USCR is prepared to engage the Department of State, UNHCR and other interested parties in addressing this issue.

So what can be done to end warehousing? It is clear the answers are both complex and simple. The complex answer is that UNHCR, the donor community and host governments must adopt

new policies and devise new practices that prioritize refugee rights. We believe it would be enormously helpful if the Senate passed a resolution calling for the end of refugee warehousing. This would be a powerful signal to the world that it's time to honor refugee rights. Congress should also authorize a pilot program that would 1) develop a plan for the strategic use of funding to motivate the granting of Convention rights to refugees, such as reimbursement schemes for expenses incurred by host governments and 2) develop alternative models of assisting refugees outside traditional camp settings in a manner compatible with the exercise of Convention rights. Congress should also request a report from the State Department on how refugee assistance is or could be used to promote refugee rights.

The simple answer, in response to Abraham and all the other millions of warehoused refugees, is we believe that God does intend for refugees to live like human beings. The simple answer is that WE must start honoring their rights and stop the immoral and illegal practice of warehousing refugees.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.