

Statement of

# **The Honorable Patrick Leahy**

United States Senator  
Vermont  
September 21, 2004

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Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security, and Citizenship  
Hearing on "Refugees: Seeking Solutions to a Global Concern"  
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Today's hearing provides our annual opportunity to review the state of our refugee program. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, there were 9.7 million refugees in the world at the end of 2003. Many of them live in desperate conditions in refugee camps around the world, and a substantial number have no realistic hope of returning to their homes in the foreseeable future. Our ideals and our tradition demand that we assist these people, including by offering some refuge in our nation.

This administration has indicated that we will resettle more than 50,000 refugees in the United States in the current fiscal year. Although this is a substantial increase from the 28,421 refugees admitted in fiscal year 2003, we will again fall far short of the President's stated goal of resettling 70,000 refugees.

I know that there are many dedicated people in the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security who are working hard to increase the numbers of refugees admitted. I urge them to continue their work, and I would ask our witnesses today to offer their concrete plans for how we will again reach the 70,000 refugees plateau.

I would like to note an issue of great importance to me that was included in the report on the refugee program from the Departments of State, Homeland Security, and Health and Human Services, which this Committee recently received. The report stated: "We note that the 10,000-person statutory limitation on the number of asylees who can adjust their status has resulted in a backlog of adjustment of status applications some 17 years long. Nearly 22,500 individuals were granted asylum during fiscal year 2003. It is estimated that these asylees from 2003 will not be eligible to apply for U.S. citizenship until at least 2025 if the cap remains at 10,000 adjustments per year."

Along with Senator Kennedy, Senator Brownback and others in Congress, I have long believed that we should abolish the arbitrary annual cap on the number of asylees who can become legal permanent residents. This is not about who can come here, or giving people rights they would not otherwise have. These are people who our government has found have a reasonable fear of persecution if they returned to their countries. They live and work here legally and they have the right to apply to become citizens, but the backlog caused by this cap forces them to wait for 17

years to become citizens. Some are literally dying before their applications for citizenship can be processed. Abolishing the cap would also enhance homeland security, because any asylee or other alien who applies for citizenship must go through a rigorous background check.

I know Senator Sessions is interested in this issue, and I am encouraged that the Administration has indicated a desire to work with us to address what has really become an issue of basic fairness for people who have complied with our immigration laws.

Finally, I would like to take this opportunity to praise my own State's dedication to refugees. I am proud that Vermont has provided a home for refugees from Bosnia, Vietnam, Sudan, Somalia, and elsewhere around the world. The presence of these refugees has made Vermont a richer and better place to live.