

WRITTEN TESTIMONY OF DAUDA SESAY
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VICE CHAIR, BOARD OF DIRECTORS, REFUGEE CONGRESS

Mr. Chairman, Ranking Member, and the honorable members of the Judiciary Committee, I humbly greet you and thank you for holding this crucial and timely hearing. My name is Dauda Sesay, and I am a husband and a father of five lovely children. My wife, daughter and I were resettled to the United States as refugees from Sierra Leone in 2009. I am deeply honored for the opportunity to testify before this Subcommittee because of my personal connection to the refugee resettlement program, and to express my gratitude to my fellow Americans for welcoming me, giving me and my family a second chance at life and so many others like me to this country.

Today's hearing comes at a time when we are experiencing the worst humanitarian crisis in history. According to UNHCR, over 100 million people are forced to flee their homes and about 26 million of those are refugees, which roughly equates to 2 people every 3 seconds. By the time I finish with my five-minute opening, over 200 people somewhere around the world are likely to become a refugee. I just want you to consider who those numbers represent - they represent human lives - men, women, and children – like my family and me.

Our nation has a long-standing tradition of welcoming individuals/families seeking safety. Americans of all walks of life have shown compassion and welcomed refugees. My family experienced that welcome when Louisianians helped us settle in our new home. I remember during my first semester in college, I was being bullied and called names like 'Kunta Kinteh,' 'Slave boy.' During those difficult moments, I saw the true generosity of my fellow Americans, who stood up for me. A [poll released](#) just two months ago found that more than two-thirds of American voters across the country from different races, cultural backgrounds, education, and political affiliation, believe strongly that the U.S. should continue to have a refugee resettlement program. Unsurprisingly, that number climbed to 89% when asked if people personally know a refugee - someone like me.

Let me tell you a little bit about why I have a personal connection to this lifesaving program.

In the early 1990s, my home country, Sierra Leone, was violently attacked in one of the bloodiest civil wars in history, resulting in over [70,000 people killed](#) and almost 2.5 million displaced. This is a nation that had a population of about 4.5 million at the time. That war was characterized by widespread atrocities, including amputations (as young as three years old), girls and women were subjected to sexual violence, pregnant women undergoing brutal stillbirths, and families burnt alive - and these are just a few examples. So many children like me had to endure these cruel and tragic atrocities.

At a young age, like any other teenager, I had aspirations and dreams for who and what I wanted to be. I wanted to study medicine and become a gynecologist or a pediatrician because my country had, and continues to have, one of the [highest infant mortality rates in the world](#). All my

aspirational goals were shattered when I was forced to leave everything behind after armed rebels attacked my hometown.

On that day, after school, I remember playing with my friends outside my father's work complex, waiting for our parents, when armed rebels attacked. There were gunshots everywhere, and armed men stormed the complex, captured nine of us, and placed us in line for our hands to be chopped off using the slogan "do you want a long sleeve or short sleeve?"

In unspeakable horror, I watched five of my childhood friends' hands get amputated, a portion of my hand was almost cut off, and I got shot in my left leg. My father came out pleading for our release, but sadly and painfully, he was killed before me. My father - a true hero - died in front of me as he gave his precious life to protect us and what was left of our community.

When I later regained consciousness in an internally displaced camp, I learned that my family's house was set on fire with my mom, siblings, and other relatives inside. My mum survived the horror, but horrifically, my 7-year-old baby sister was burned alive - a sad and painful fact I learned decades later when I reconnected with my mom in 2014. I remembered during our conversation, my mother said to me, "I am hopeful that I will see my husband - that the same fate that brought us together, would be the same fate that would bring him back." I realized then that she didn't know that dad was killed. I had to be the one to tell her this sad news.

Like many refugees, I would have preferred to remain in my homeland. However, due to the constant fear of persecution, the brutal war that took away my loved ones, and the direct target to my family because of my father's traditional title, I had no other choice but to flee. We spent days in the bush, ate raw leaves to survive, and others drank their urine before I finally got into a 10-wheeler truck that passed through Guinea to Basse, in the Gambia. Due to my deteriorating health condition, I was transferred to the capital Banjul for medical treatment. After a few months at the hospital, I was so traumatized, crying and murmuring in Temne, my local language. One day a young lady walked up to me and greeted me in my local language, "Ndereh," meaning "Good morning." Words alone could not express the feeling of hearing someone speak my local language to me for the first time since I was admitted to the hospital. From that day forward, I had a family to adopt me and look after my wellbeing, and with it, a renewed feeling of finding a home, a family. A few years later, the family bond strengthened, and now, that young lady who greeted me at the hospital is my wife and together we are raising five lovely children.

Conditions in the refugee camp were extremely tough. We lived in a plastic tent crowded in one big space with no dedicated bathroom. We had to wait at night to shower and went into the bush to defecate. During the rainy season, most of the feces we deposited in the bush came through the broken tents. We faced another challenge with water-borne diseases.

As one of the fortunate refugees considered for resettlement, we had to undergo many background checks, first from the host country, then the UNHCR office and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and finally, the United States Department of Homeland Security, and other U.S. Agencies. I spent almost ten years in a refugee camp, even with my

medical condition, before I was finally resettled to the United States. The screening process was vigorous – and there were no shortcuts.

Once I came to the United States, even though I faced post-resettlement challenges - such as discrimination, bullying, and learning a new language and new way of life, and a new culture, I was determined to further my education, and to get a good job to provide for my wife and my young daughter. I enrolled in college, earned an associate's degree in Applied Science in Process Technology, and worked at Dow Chemical for over seven years. What made the most significant difference in overcoming these hardships, healing from past traumas, and earning a college degree was the welcome I received when I joined my new community in Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Today, I work with refugees and immigrants as the National Network Director at [African Communities Together](#), A national organization that empowers African Immigrants to advance economically, integrate socially, and engage civically. I also founded the [Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants](#) (LORI) to assist refugees and immigrants throughout their various stages of integration to become self-reliant. I am also the Vice Chair of the Board of Directors at [Refugee Congress](#).

In my work, I see firsthand that the resettlement program faces severe challenges as it struggles to regain capacity, while unprecedented community support has helped fill the gap. A [recent report](#) from Refugee Congress, Refugee Council USA, and ECDC, concluded that a variety of factors contribute to how well refugees become integrated into their new communities - English language acquisition, access to education and professional development, and access to case management services during the first critical year when refugees arrive in the U.S.

The life-saving refugee resettlement has deep value to the cultural, humanitarian, and economic fabric of the U.S. As I continue to reflect on my journey, I appreciate the welcome I received and the unique community I have been able to build in Louisiana and across the United States. I believe Congress should act in a way that reflects the values of the vast majority of Americans who want to welcome refugees and other immigrants seeking safety. Like so many refugees who resettle in the U.S., we not only welcome others who are seeking protection, but we also create safe and vibrant communities that are welcoming and inclusive.

Because the U.S. allowed us to rebuild our lives, we take every opportunity to give back to the U.S. For instance, during the height of the Covid 19 pandemic, the Louisiana Organization for Refugees and Immigrants hosted ten community vaccination events and provided food and basic household goods to over 300 local families during Hurricanes Ida and Isaac. Across the U.S. refugee doctors and nurses [risked their lives](#) to keep communities safe and healthy. Given the barriers many refugees and immigrants face in having their medical degrees recognized in the U.S., they still chose to serve our communities - as volunteers. That is why I commend Congress for passing the bipartisan [Bridging the Gap for New Americans Act](#) last fall, which requires the U.S. Department of Labor to study employment barriers for immigrants and refugees with international credentials.

In 2017, an [internal study](#) from the Department of Health and Human Services found that refugees over a ten year period “contributed an estimated \$269.1 billion in revenues to all levels of government” and that “the net fiscal impact of refugees was positive over the 10-year period, at \$63 billion.” Refugees are also innovators and job creators. A study from the [New American Economy](#) that same year found that the businesses of refugees generated \$4.6 billion in business income during a single year - 2015.

Refugees also revitalize cities and towns by offsetting population decline and boosting economic growth nationwide by opening businesses, paying taxes, and buying homes. Many businesses would go under without refugee employees. Don't just take my word for it. As Mayor of Utica, NY Robert Palmieri notes: "We've had a rebirth into some of our older neighborhoods that were starting to decay. Refugees have come in here and revitalized them and made them a proud neighborhood once again."

The value and necessity of the refugee resettlement program is clear, but it also requires your renewed commitment and investment.

Now is the time for Congress to reaffirm the U.S.' commitment to refugee resettlement by (1) exerting oversight over the Administration's operations of the resettlement program to welcome more refugees, (2) investing resources that support refugees and the communities that welcome them, (3) strengthening and expanding refugee and asylum processing mechanisms, including expansion of equitable pathways for individuals and families seeking protection, and (4) passing bipartisan legislation such as the Afghan Adjustment Act, or the Refugee Protection Act, both of which will be reintroduced later this year.

In conclusion, I wanted to thank you once again for the opportunity to share my lived experience and offer a few recommendations to help you make an informed decision. The majority of Americans want to welcome refugees. Finally, if my story and the stories of so many other refugees make you feel compassion, I ask that you turn your compassion into action and save the critical lifesaving refugee resettlement program.

Thank you. May God bless you, and may God bless the United States of America.

Dauda Sesay