

Statement of Senator Tom Coburn, M.D.

“No Safe Haven: Accountability for Human Rights Violators, Part II”

Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law
United States Senate Committee on the Judiciary
October 6, 2009

I would like to start by thanking the witnesses for being here today to join in this ongoing discussion about what we can and should be doing to keep human rights violators from finding safe haven in the United States.

Although the Subcommittee on Human Rights and the Law has only existed for two Congresses, we have already passed legislation addressing issues such as trafficking, child soldiers, and genocide. Hearings called by Chairman Durbin have shed light on other egregious human rights abuses that occur around the world today. While crafting solutions to address all of these atrocities has proven to be quite a challenge, the one thing we ought to be able to do is ensure that criminals who perpetrate offenses against humanity are never allowed to find safe haven within the borders of the United States.

Chairman Durbin held a similar oversight hearing in this subcommittee two years ago to give Congress a better understanding of Executive Branch efforts on this front. Although a scheduling conflict prevented me from attending that hearing, I reviewed the transcript and found the testimony and discussion helpful. I was encouraged to learn of the work done by the Human Rights Violators Unit and the Human Rights Law Division within Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) at the Department of Homeland Security, as well as the work done by the Office of Special Investigations and the Domestic Security Section at the Department of Justice. I look forward to hearing about the progress that has been made in those offices since our last oversight hearing, and I look forward to hearing for the first time from the FBI and State Department about these issues.

While our last oversight hearing helped shed light on the enforcement of human rights laws in the United States, one question that I did not feel was adequately answered was how many human rights violators are estimated to be in the United States today? This seems to be a threshold question, as we seek to determine the kind and amount of resources to devote to pursuing those perpetrators. I hope to hear updated numbers from today's witnesses. I also hope to hear more about your ongoing efforts — especially about the coordination between each of your agencies. I hope you will speak candidly with us about other tools you may need

to more effectively do your jobs, and about the challenges — both practical and legal — that you face.

Let me stress that I view today's hearing as another step in an ongoing dialogue about how best Congress and the Executive Branch can partner together to achieve a common goal. A collaborative effort is the best way to undertake such a monumental challenge. The Subcommittee worked well with the last Administration, and I am anxious to hear, for the first time, this Administration's views on human rights violators seeking safe haven in the United States.

That said, I would note that the testimony of each witness here today arrived well past the Committee's deadline. I understand that this is not necessarily the fault of the individuals on today's panel, but I must say that I am disappointed that the Administration would allow this to happen for its first interaction with the Human Rights Subcommittee. I trust this delay does not represent the placement of human rights enforcement as a priority in the Executive Branch.

I look forward to hearing our witnesses, and I thank the Chairman for convening today's important hearing.