

**Statement of Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vt.),
Ranking Member, Senate Judiciary Committee,
Senate Judiciary Subcommittee Hearing “Oversight of the Administration’s FY 2017
Refugee Resettlement Program,”
September 28, 2016**

Today, more than 65 million people around the world have been forcibly displaced from their homes. It is easy to be overwhelmed by those numbers. It is easy to forget that those millions are made up of individual people – mothers and fathers who love their children just as much as we love our own. And their children are just as fragile as our children. A five-year-old Syrian child is just as afraid of blood and violence as a five-year-old American child. We need look no further than the eyes of a scared little boy in an ambulance to know that human truth.

I am glad that we are having this hearing today. Our refugee resettlement program is an important part of who we are as country, just as it is an important part of our role as a world leader. As we discuss our different views on the program, I hope we can all remember that we are talking about people. Real people. Vulnerable people.

We are in the midst of the largest refugee crisis since World War II. Families all over the world, from Syria, to Sudan, to Central America, are fleeing violence and persecution. The displacement of such an enormous number of people is a global challenge. The human suffering caused by this upheaval, as well as the security concerns it raises, requires a collective response.

Last week’s summit at the United Nations General Assembly, the first ever dedicated to refugees, was an important step but we must do more than talk. We must invest meaningful resources to stabilize these regions, and where we cannot, we must support the resettlement of refugees. No country can shoulder the current humanitarian burden alone, but President Obama is right that we can set an example by doing our part. That is what it means to lead.

I am encouraged that the Obama Administration has announced its goal of resettling 110,000 refugees during the 2017 fiscal year. Although this number is just a fraction of the millions fleeing persecution, it is critical for the United States to strengthen its own commitments as it rallies other countries to step forward and do their share. These numbers are not shocking and they are very much in line with what we as a country have done before. We must be cautious, however, that in taking on this increased number we do so responsibly and increase the resources to help the communities that open their homes and hearts to these newcomers. As we have seen in Vermont for decades, refugees can enrich and revitalize our cities and towns, but they also need our help, especially at first.

I am proud that one of those people who has helped enrich Vermont is here with us today. Puspa Luitel is a former refugee from Bhutan and was resettled in the United States in 2008. He recently graduated from Vermont Law School and has been a volunteer in several refugee organizations. He and his wife and child are actively involved in his adopted hometown of Charlotte. His perseverance and desire to achieve should be an inspiration to us all.

Before I conclude, I want to mention that while I am heartened that the Administration announced an expansion of Central American refugee processing as part of the refugee consultation, it is not enough. The announcement acknowledges the pandemic of violence and impunity gripping the Northern Triangle countries of Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala and the need to provide an opportunity for those refugees to seek protection without making the dangerous journey north to our border.

I remain disappointed, however, that the Administration has continued its seriously flawed policy of family detention for asylum-seeking women and children here at home. I am particularly concerned about the prolonged detention of mothers and children at the Berks family detention facility in Pennsylvania. Many of the children at Berks, ranging between the ages of 2 and 16, have been detained for nearly a year or more, and there are troubling indications that detention is having a harmful effect on their physical and mental well-being. That is why I sent a letter to Homeland Security Secretary Johnson yesterday reiterating my call to end family detention and urging him to release those in prolonged detention under appropriate circumstances. Family detention is wrong. It undermines our commitment to providing refuge to those seeking protection and it must end.

Our acceptance of refugees is a rich part of America's history. We take pride in the words engraved on the Statue of Liberty:

*“Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”*

Those words have shaped who we are in countless ways, just as the refugees they have invited have left their mark on our great nation. Albert Einstein, Madeleine Albright, and Sergey Brin all came here as refugees.

I am disheartened by the hateful rhetoric that suggests we should turn our back on our history and be afraid. We must not forget that refugees continue to be the most stringently vetted travelers to the United States. And efforts to exclude whole populations simply because of their religion are not only un-American, they are dangerous and play into the false ISIS narrative that the United States is at war with Islam.

We as a country face a choice. Will we recognize our common humanity and take responsibility to help those who have lost everything and are fleeing for their lives, or will we turn our backs, succumbing to xenophobic rhetoric based on fear, not fact?

I believe in the America that will stand up and do our part. It is time for us to lead.