

**Testimony of Jenny Yang, Senior Vice President of Advocacy and Policy, World Relief
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“Supporting Hong Kong’s Pro-Democracy Movement Through U.S. Refugee Policy”
Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Border, Security and Immigration
Wednesday, December 16th, 2020**

Chairman Cornyn, Ranking Member Durbin, and distinguished members of the subcommittee,

Thank you for holding this important and timely hearing on the plight of Hong Kong residents who face harassment, arrests, and detention due to their political activities. At a time when 80 million people are forcibly displaced around the world, the highest number in recorded history, strong U.S. leadership is needed now more than ever to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to those who are persecuted.

With the passage of national security legislation on June 30th, 2020, China threatens the autonomy of Hong Kong and the lives and freedoms of its people. Many Hong Kong residents, including pro-democracy leaders and protesters, are no longer safe in their own homes. This new law and its implementation are Orwellian. In the past three years, thousands of people have already fled Hong Kong to seek safety and now even more remain in Hong Kong fearing for their future. Last week’s arrest of democracy campaigner Jimmy Lai makes clear that the insecurities faced by pro-democracy activists continue. The United States’ ability to respond to such threats and offer protection through a strong and flexible U.S. refugee admissions program (USRAP) is a direct indicator of our commitment to human rights and will have an impact on our ability to promote democracy abroad.

World Relief, the humanitarian arm of the National Association of Evangelicals, works in fourteen countries around the world to respond to humanitarian disasters and end extreme poverty, and we resettle refugees and serve other immigrants in seventeen communities across the United States. World Relief as a member of Refugee Council USA (RCUSA), a coalition of 29 U.S.-based non-governmental organizations dedicated to the protection and welcome of refugees, asylum-seekers, and other forcibly displaced populations, encourages the Trump administration to find ways to assist people impacted by the situation in Hong Kong, as well as other persecuted peoples in the region.

The inclusion of residents of Hong Kong in the FY21 [Presidential Determination](#) on Refugee Admissions was a first step in that direction. The U.S. refugee admissions program is a critical tool to offer safe haven to those who are in harm’s way and do not have other options for protection. But in order for the United States to offer genuine protections to these refugees, the administration must do more to operate the USRAP in good faith and ensure that those who flee directly to the United States from Hong Kong and elsewhere are granted asylum in accordance with international and U.S. law.

World Relief and RCUSA urge the administration to utilize the USRAP as it was intended to be used, as a tool of protection, both for Hong Kong residents and other refugees in need of resettlement. We are committed to the protection of displaced persons around the world who are persecuted, including individuals impacted by the situation in Hong Kong. We support the many [calls](#) from members of this subcommittee on both sides of the aisle for the United States to welcome refugees from Hong Kong and recognize the protection needs of Hong Kong

residents. We likewise affirm that the protection needs of the people of Hong Kong should be considered alongside the equally critical needs of other refugees from China, such as the Uyghurs and [other Muslims](#) who have been detained in more than 1,300 concentration camps in Xinjiang. We are also deeply concerned by the dire circumstances of refugees fleeing other protracted and violent crises worldwide, like those from Syria, Somalia, Burma, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Venezuela, and others around the world who have been waiting for protection, in some cases for decades. Even while the current administration has prioritized those fleeing religious persecution, a recent [report](#) by World Relief and Open Doors USA, “Closed Doors: The U.S. Refugee Resettlement and Asylum Processes” found that many persecuted religious minorities have not been able to access the USRAP. In FY20, just 2,811 Christian refugees were resettled to the United States from the 50 countries on Open Doors USA’s 2020 World Watch List of countries where Christians face persecution, down 83% since FY16. This has meant a decline of 92% of persecuted Christians from Iraq and a decline of 81% of persecuted Christians from Burma from FY16 to FY20. In addition, over the same time period, there has been a 96% decline of persecuted Yezidis from Iraq and Syria, a 86% decline of persecuted Muslims (mostly Rohingya) from Burma, and a decline of 100% of persecuted Jews from Iran.

During the last several years, the refugee admissions target has plunged from the historic norm of 95,000 to 15,000, the lowest level in the history of the program. In FY20, fewer than 12,000 refugees were resettled in the United States. Refugees who were approved for resettlement years ago are languishing in camps and urban settings, still waiting for safety as well as reunification with their loved ones. World Relief and RCUSA urge the administration to return the USRAP to historic norms and strengthen its capacity which will be essential to implementing any resettlement program for refugees from Hong Kong and responding to emerging needs like this in the future.

The definition of a refugee is someone who has fled their country due to persecution based on their race, nationality, religion, political opinion, or particular social group. Resettlement is a last resort for refugees who cannot safely return to their home country nor safely remain in the country to which they initially fled. Fewer than one-percent of refugees will ever be resettled to a third country. The USRAP was created under the Refugee Act of 1980 with broad bipartisan support in order to solidify a public-private partnership with capacity to respond to situations in which people are persecuted and without avenues for protection, including populations of particular humanitarian concern to the United States. The USRAP continues to maintain bipartisan support, as demonstrated by bipartisan [resolutions](#), [letters](#), and the bipartisan [Congressional Refugee Caucus](#). The USRAP also enjoys broad [support](#) from faith, business, and national security communities across the United States.

There are significant challenges to resettling refugees from Hong Kong. The low refugee ceiling as well as reduced overseas processing capacity has meant that the life-saving tools of the program have been significantly diminished. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), the Department of Homeland Security agency that conducts in-person interviews with refugees being considered for U.S. resettlement, is facing severe financial shortfalls and almost furloughed most of its staff. These challenges are on top of an already lengthy and arduous vetting process required for all refugees that has often ground to a standstill under this administration, including biometric and biographic checks; interagency intelligence sharing; screenings against multiple domestic and international terrorist and criminal databases; background investigations by the FBI, Department of Defense, State Department, and National Counterterrorism Center; and in-person interviews. In-country processing, evacuations,

chartered flights, bringing refugees to a location outside of Hong Kong for processing, and alternative pathways to protection should all be considered in light of these challenges and the sensitive diplomatic situation in the region. Fortunately, the USRAP has dealt with similar realities in the past and, with the leadership of the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, has been able to navigate them to bring people to safety, including in the cases of [Amerasians](#) resettled from Vietnam in the 1980s, [Kurds](#) fleeing Saddam Hussein in the 1990s, [refugees](#) from Kosovo in the early 2000s, and [Cubans](#) who were fleeing a Communist regime over several decades.

The most important steps that Congress and the administration can take to prepare for and operationalize refugee resettlement from Hong Kong are to restore the USRAP to historic norms and to rebuild and robustly support USRAP overseas processing and domestic resettlement capacities. Congress should work with the administration to increase capacity for U.S. Embassy and NGO referrals, schedule ongoing USCIS circuit rides to the region, and break through other logjams in processing. Also, due to the administration's drastic cuts to refugee admissions, more than [100 resettlement offices](#) have had to close their programs – a stark ⅓ of all resettlement offices in the United States. Congress must act to continue funding the USRAP at robust levels for FY21, including \$4.35 billion for the Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) account, \$4.52 billion for the International Disaster Assistance (IDA) account, \$100 million for the Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance (ERMA) account, and \$6.34 billion for the Refugee and Entrant Assistance (REA) account. Such public funding is leveraged through public-private partnerships through the nine refugee resettlement agencies. Just through World Relief's network alone, we currently partner with more than 1,100 local congregations, 3,700 active volunteers, and raised more than \$10 million in in-kind contributions to serve newly arrived refugees in FY20. And we're confident that our church and volunteer network will continue to grow if the number of refugees allowed to be resettled increases once again.

In addition, in order to ensure that refugees fleeing Hong Kong are granted asylum in the United States, and not improperly denied, banned or turned away, the administration should immediately withdraw its recently finalized [regulations](#) and policies that ban, block and deny asylum to asylum-seekers, including bans or proposed rules that deny asylum to refugees who transit other countries on their way to the United States and deny asylum to people who fled "brief detentions," repeated threats not yet carried out, or persecution deemed not sufficiently "extreme."

The United States needs to lead by example in providing refuge to those fleeing persecution. Thousands of people across the United States, from local business owners to church volunteers, are eager to welcome their newest neighbors. The USRAP is a core expression of our common values as Americans- to show hospitality, to stand with those fleeing persecution, and to offer hope to those who have nowhere else to go. Whether the residents of Hong Kong will avail themselves of the protection of the United States may depend on how agile and efficient the process is. Thus, the United States should not only strengthen its own refugee and asylum processes but work with countries like Australia, Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom and others to keep other pathways of protection open.

These policy and programmatic changes, in addition to creative thinking regarding mechanisms for the resettlement of refugees from Hong Kong, are essential to meeting the humanitarian and foreign policy objectives of international protection. At this time of unprecedented forced migration, the United States has a moral responsibility to do as much as it can to meet the needs of our vulnerable neighbors and to promote freedom and democracy abroad that reflects

our national history and reinforces our national character. Congress should work closely with the administration to provide active oversight of the program, pass legislation as necessary, and support robust appropriations to assist and protect refugees both in the United States and abroad. World Relief and its RCUSA partners look forward to working with the administration and Congress to meet these objectives.

World Relief is a global Christian humanitarian organization that brings sustainable solutions to the world's greatest problems – disasters, extreme poverty, violence, oppression, and mass displacement. For over 75 years, we've partnered with churches and community leaders in the U.S. and abroad to bring hope, healing and transformation to the most vulnerable.

RCUSA is a diverse coalition advocating for just and humane laws and policies, and the promotion of dialogue and communication among government, civil society, and those who need protection and welcome. Individual RCUSA members do not all address all refugee-related issues, nor do all individual members approach common refugee-related issues identically.