

**Uzra Zeya, President and CEO, Human Rights First
House Committee on Foreign Affairs, April 30, 2025 Hearing
The Need for an Authorized State Department**

Thank you, Chairman Mast and Ranking Member Meeks, for the invitation to testify today.

I appear before this Committee having served proudly for nearly three decades as a career foreign service officer under five Presidents, Republican and Democratic. I was honored to return to public service and secure bipartisan Senate confirmation as Under Secretary of State for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights during the Biden Administration. In this role, advancing U.S. human rights and humanitarian leadership worldwide and countering global threats to our security and prosperity, I prioritized consultation with both sides of the aisle, including as a member of the Congressional Executive Commission for China and former U.S. Special Coordinator for Tibetan Issues.

As of last week, I have the honor of leading Human Rights First (HRF), a non-partisan human rights organization that has engaged and held to account every U.S. administration in pursuit of a foreign policy that upholds human rights for all. Such a foreign policy makes Americans safer by keeping authoritarians in check and securing more reliable, rights-respecting U.S. partners. It benefits American workers, consumers, and business, by producing a more level playing field, purging forced labor from our supply chains, and fighting corruption that lines the pockets of autocrats and narcotraffickers alike. It also protects those who stand up to oppressive regimes, report the truth at grave personal risk, help make their countries safe and inclusive for all people, and seek refuge when persecuted for how they worship, whom they love, or who they are. For its part, HRF has advanced human rights for all by supporting rights defenders on the front lines of conflict, representation for individuals fleeing persecution, and policy outcomes that bolstered refugee and anti-torture protections, accountability, and anti-corruption, from the Refugee Act of 1980 to the Global Magnitsky Act of 2016.

Today's hearing could not be more timely, as a global democratic recession approaches the two-decade mark, forced displacement worldwide is at a historic peak, and autocratic overreach and transnational repression by Russia, China, Iran, the DPRK and others surge unabated. Congressional oversight and guidance

are vital to the work of the State Department as it navigates complex and overlapping crises around the world. Indeed, Congress has often pushed reluctant administrations to take up these issues – enacting laws that oblige the executive to examine and report publicly on trafficking-in-persons, religious freedom and corruption. For these reasons, this moment of truth is not the time to politicize the Department’s mission or retreat into partisan corners. State Authorization can and should rebuild bipartisan consensus around the imperative for diplomacy and foreign assistance that sustains U.S. human rights and humanitarian leadership and recognizes the direct through-line to American security, prosperity, and well-being.

Recent weeks and months have been disheartening on that count. We’ve seen the Trump Administration’s chaotic take-down of USAID and other Congressionally-mandated entities, alongside its flat refusal to spend bipartisan Congressional appropriations -- from life-saving disease prevention, disaster response, and food aid to emergency support for human rights defenders at risk of being killed. In announcing drastic cuts to State Department personnel last week, Secretary Rubio wrongly slandered public servants whose roles and mandates are to advocate for human rights and democracy as pursuing “radical causes” in “direct conflict with the goals” of government leaders.

Let’s remember what those goals are. Congress has rightly [made clear](#) that “a principal goal” of U.S. foreign policy “shall be to promote the increased observance of internationally recognized human rights by all countries.” But instead of carrying forward President Reagan’s historic call for an “infrastructure for democracy,” which every administration I served built upon in some form, we’re seeing some in today’s executive branch parrot [Kremlin](#) tropes against so-called “color revolutions” and vilify those helping hold U.S. adversaries to account. The latter includes vitriol directed at Voice of America and Radio Free Asia journalists getting uncensored news into China, U.S. Institute of Peace experts informing U.S. diplomacy to dislodge extremist and Wagner Group footholds across Africa, and brave affiliates of the National Endowment for Democracy helping front-line states like Nepal, Moldova, Armenia, and Mongolia turn the page on their autocratic pasts and anchor a democratic future.

It is not too late for Congress to reassert its historic and deep-rooted bipartisan consensus that U.S. human rights and humanitarian leadership matters. Recent

[polling](#) shows that an overwhelming majority of Americans say the United States should maintain its levels of investment in foreign assistance, including strong majorities for humanitarian relief and democracy and human rights.

In that bipartisan spirit, I want to underscore three overarching considerations as this committee considers authorizing legislation for the State Department, how to make it more cost-effective, and the implications of current reform proposals:

First, investing in U.S. human rights and humanitarian leadership makes Americans safer and more secure from autocratic overreach and transnational threats. Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine upended global food and energy security and threatened neighbors, including treaty allies. But the Kremlin's aim to erase Ukraine's democracy, culture, and sovereignty was thwarted, thanks to the courage of the Ukrainian people and steadfast U.S., European, and international support. That U.S. support helped millions of refugees and IDPs, anti-corruption activists, the recovery of Ukrainian children abducted into Russia, and the prosecution of Russian war crimes – all of which helped keep Ukraine's democracy alive and prevent Russia from marching further west.

When the U.S. government pushes back on transnational repression and gross violations of human rights like extrajudicial killings, torture, and arbitrary detention -- whether those acts are committed by adversaries like China and Iran, terrorists like Hamas or Al Shabaab, narcotraffickers in our hemisphere, or abusive partners like Rwanda and Saudi Arabia -- it pays dividends for the safety of Americans at home and abroad. When U.S.-supported peace processes include women and civil society, it increases the chances that resulting accords actually break the cycle of impunity and conflict, as we've seen in Liberia, Northern Ireland, and Colombia. When the United States enforces human rights standards when providing assistance to foreign security forces, it upholds U.S. law, creates more reliable partners for U.S. servicemembers, and reduces drivers of anti-Americanism abroad that can be exploited by our geopolitical rivals.

Second, U.S. human rights and humanitarian leadership makes the United States more prosperous. With longstanding bipartisan support, State has partnered with the Department of Labor, Department of Homeland Security, and other agencies to help end forced labor, prevent its byproducts from entering the U.S., and raise labor standards abroad, benefiting workers in those countries and leveling the

playing field for American businesses and workers. Recent slashing of programs supporting these activities will be detrimental to workers here and abroad and U.S. business, from Gulf Coast and New England fisheries to Texas cattle ranchers. Corruption is also a major barrier for many U.S. companies investing and doing business overseas, and one that a whole suite of U.S. policies and initiatives have worked to confront. This makes it all the more concerning that the current administration has suspended enforcement of core U.S. anti-corruption laws and that its only Global Magnitsky action thus far has been to lift sanctions on a foreign official designated for involvement in corruption.

U.S. humanitarian leadership similarly protects human lives and advances U.S. security and prosperity by promoting stability abroad, reducing onward migration to the United States, and upholding legal pathways that enrich U.S. society. State Department advocacy for shared responsibility on migration and program support helped enable nearly two million Venezuelan refugees to remain in Colombia with temporary protected status. Similarly, with U.S. support, UN bodies have helped develop asylum systems that enable far greater numbers to seek protection in countries like Costa Rica and Mexico than ever before. And when the United States does its part by resettling refugees here, it helps ensure that allies and other front-line states remain willing to host the vast majority of the world's refugees. In turn, as a 2024 [study](#) by the Health and Human Services Department found, refugees and asylees in the United States delivered nearly \$124 billion in net fiscal gains over 15 years at the federal, state, and local levels thanks to jobs filled, businesses launched, goods and services purchased, and taxes paid.

Third, and finally, following the dissolution of USAID, many of the recently announced steps to slash State Department personnel, bureaus, offices, and programs and integrate virtually all functions into the regional bureaus will result in an abdication of U.S. human rights and humanitarian leadership. This ultimately undercuts Americans' safety, security, and prosperity. With due respect to my former colleagues at the State Department, there is nothing automatic about ensuring that the policymaking process takes human rights and humanitarian concerns into account in the ways that I've described. That's why Congress originally created an assistant secretary for human rights and humanitarian affairs and requires the State Department's annual country reports on human rights, religious freedom, and trafficking in persons. Choosing to prioritize human rights and humanitarian issues sometimes requires accepting some friction in a

diplomatic relationship or internal Department or interagency deliberations. But through crisis after crisis, I saw regional and functional bureaus roll up their sleeves to problem solve together and bring their expertise to the fore. This was reflected in joint action to hold accountable thousands of enablers of Putin's war on Ukraine, build pathways to safety for America's Afghan allies facing Taliban death threats, help Iranian activists communicate with the world in the face of a state-sponsored war on women and girls, and secure the release of prisoners of conscience from Egypt and Nicaragua to Nigeria and Russia.

Abolishing the position I recently held and excising "human rights and democracy" out of the State Department's top leadership responsibilities, as Secretary Rubio announced last week, sends a further marginalizing signal about the importance of these issues, both within the Department and to nations hostile to human rights. But the boxes on the organizational chart don't matter nearly as much as the policies and people behind them. For example, elimination of the Conflict and Stabilization Bureau and Offices of Global Criminal Justice and Global Women's Issues will shutter U.S. negotiation support that helped push ceasefire agreements over the finish line, U.S.-led accountability efforts for the world's worst rights violators, and U.S.-leadership combating gender-based violence globally. These cuts also erase Department leads for landmark, bipartisan legislation like the Women, Peace and Security Act, the Global Fragility Act, and the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act.

Vague and opaque consolidation plans, combined with an imminent and unexplained 15 percent across the board cut in domestic personnel, also bode poorly for State Department effectiveness and American security and prosperity. Consolidation of the Office of Trafficking in Persons into the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration (PRM) combines two disparate missions and ignores J/TIP leadership implementing the bipartisan Uyghur Forced Labor Prevention Act. Consolidation of USAID humanitarian responsibilities into PRM, meanwhile, cannot be accomplished with an attenuated PRM domestic staff. Even with draconian cuts to USAID programs, PRM needs substantially more personnel and expertise to oversee what remains of USAID's disaster and famine response, from which the U.S. government's best experts were cruelly terminated. Oversight should ensure consolidation is not a cover for ending U.S. humanitarian response as we know it.

Everyone who has worked in and with the State Department knows that its processes can be cumbersome and need improvement to get better results. I took that approach in leveraging technology to streamline production of the J Family's flagship Congressional reports, saving 30,000 production hours annually while upholding the reports' quality and impact. This administration is reportedly taking a radically different approach to this year's human right reports, deleting mention of fundamental freedoms like freedom of speech and freedom of assembly; the right to participate in free and fair elections; prison conditions; discrimination and violence against women, children, ethnic and racial minorities, and LGBTQI+ persons; political corruption, or other topics not strictly required by law. These carefully researched reports are the most read State Department publications, widely viewed as the gold standard for human rights assessment globally, and the basis for embassy engagements across the full spectrum of societies, from labor activists and business owners to religious leaders and government officials. Hollowing them out gives rights violators a pass and dims U.S. human rights leadership.

As this committee works on authorizing legislation for the State Department, I would urge you to raise the concerns I've shared today with the current Administration before its plan becomes a fait accompli. I also encourage you to seek the views of activists and civic leaders from countries that have benefited from U.S. diplomacy and assistance, to include those for whom U.S. policies have fallen short. Today's human rights defenders and political prisoners may be tomorrow's world leaders, like Vaclav Havel and Nelson Mandela. They will remember if the United States was on their side.

Thank you again for this opportunity. I hope Committee Members can work together to support oversight and cost-effective American diplomacy that sustains and deepens U.S. human rights and humanitarian leadership, works to keep authoritarians in check, protects the vulnerable, and welcomes the presence of refugees who enrich our country – all to the betterment of American security and prosperity.

I look forward to your questions.