

**WRITTEN TESTIMONY**

**OF**

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**HOUSE JUDICIARY COMMITTEE SUBCOMMITTEE ON IMMIGRATION &  
CITIZENSHIP**

**HEARING ON THE CURRENT STATE OF THE U.S. REFUGEE PROGRAM**

**FEBRUARY 27, 2020**

Good afternoon, Chair Lofgren, Ranking Member Buck, and members of the Subcommittee. I am Biar Atem, a refugee from South Sudan, and member of the Board of Directors for Refugee Congress. In 2014, I also founded the *South Sudan Center of America*, a registered non-profit that assists refugees.

I sit here before you on behalf of myself and on behalf of refugees across this great nation. Whether we are helping people meet basic needs, working to reduce poverty, advancing education, improving financial literacy, or organizing cultural celebrations, our values of compassion and charity are the foundation on which we seek to contribute to American civil society. It is my great honor to appear before you to share not only the refugee experience but also our gratitude to the American people for welcoming us into the United States. This country has been a life-saving force for us. And the fact that you are now willing to hear from someone like me is further testament to the decency and goodwill of this country.

In the last three years, we have heard some negative attitudes about refugees in the media. There has also been a significant reduction in the number of refugees allowed into the country. However, those attitudes and policies do not reflect the general will of the American people. From personal experience, I have been warmly received in this country by Americans from nearly all political, religious, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. My experience is not unusual. Last November, Pew Research found that seventy-three percent of Americans say it is important to take in refugees escaping war and violence. Seventy-three percent — that is an overwhelming number of the population. The question that I wish to pose this afternoon is the following: Why do the vast majority of Americans want to welcome refugees into the country?

To begin to explore this question, let me tell you a bit about my life. In the 1980s, when I was seven years old, my village in South Sudan was violently attacked during the Second Sudanese Civil War. This was a brutal ethno-religious conflict that ultimately took two million lives and displaced millions more. My village was firebombed in part because we refused to give up our Christian faith. When we were attacked, I was in the field with my father's cattle and had to flee for my life with other village children. We became part of the roughly 30,000 so-called "Lost Boys of South Sudan" who walked barefoot for 1,000 miles to reach refugee camps in Ethiopia and Kenya. Only one in three boys survived the journey. Some died of starvation; others, of malaria; still others, by lion and other animal attacks. And, of course, many died from gunfire. At one time, Ethiopian soldiers chased us out of their country, forcing us to swim across the Gilo River, which was infested with crocodiles. Many kids didn't make it out of the water. They were either eaten or shot.

These childhood experiences have made me – and many like me – especially grateful to the U.S. government which, in 2001, brought nearly 4,000 Lost Boys to live in the United States. It was the single greatest blessing of our lives.

Unfortunately, just after we arrived, September 11<sup>th</sup> happened. One consequence of the Al-Qaida attack was that the U.S. State Department reduced the number of Sudanese who were brought over for some years. There was then, as there is now, fear that terrorists might be hiding among refugee populations. I understand the concern. But for us Lost Boys, this was ironic. Osama Bin Laden spent five years in Sudan and assisted the war against our villages. You might even say that he attacked us before he attacked America. It was men like Bin Laden, and radical groups like Al-Qaida, who made us refugees in the first place. Their fanatical violence caused the march of the Lost Boys across East Africa.

It impacted us for many years. I often think about what it did to my mother. After I became a U.S. citizen, I dreamed of going to Kenya and bringing her back to the United States from the refugee camp where she lived. I especially wanted her to meet my future wife and attend our wedding in Minnesota. But that trip, instead turned into one to attend her funeral. She died of malaria in the camp after she was denied a visa by U.S. immigration to attend my wedding. Her life and death in the camp was, ultimately, a result of the tragic and fearful times we live in. Therefore, it is not an exaggeration to say that I sit here today because my family and the community of lost boys are, in various ways, victims of the same terrorism that struck the United States on September 11<sup>th</sup>.

And that fact, I think, begins to answer my initial question: Why do the vast majority of Americans want to welcome refugees into our country? Partly, it's because they know

many of us are terrorism's chief victims. Helping us is one way – one *life-affirming* way – in which the American people seek to combat terrorism. And Americans know that we come to the United States with a deep sense of loyalty, gratitude, and willingness to serve this country. When you bring in refugees, you bring in the most loyal of Americans. Some Lost Boys, for example, have joined the U.S. Armed Forces. Their gratitude has translated into wanting to protect their new homeland. As U.S. Air Force Staff Sergeant Deng Pour, a fellow Lost Boy, [told](#) a newspaper in Nebraska: “As a refugee, I wanted to give back. The only thing I can give back is to serve the country....” His sentiment is shared by every refugee that I know.

But the majority of Americans welcome refugees not just because we are victims of terrorism and not just because we want to say “thank you” to the country. We are also a *benefit* to America. Let me quickly point out three ways that we enhance our society.

***First: we bring a spirit of gratitude to the United States.*** Sometimes people who are fortunate to have been born here take this incredible country for granted. Refugees do not. When I first came here, I worked nights as a janitor in a casino in Las Vegas. It was a job for which I was profoundly thankful. Some of my American-born colleagues, who had better paying jobs, asked me why I was always smiling while I cleaned. I would then tell them my story as a Lost Boy and they would soon realize how fortunate I was to be in the United States. They saw that even cleaning out a restroom in a Vegas hotel can be done in a spirit of joy and gratitude. It was a perspective which seemed to inspire my American colleagues, contributing to their positive view of refugees. My work ethic helped to remind them that they have a lot of opportunities in this country and they should embrace those opportunities. Refugees are, then, an inspiration for our citizens.

***Second: refugees are often the most talented members of other countries.*** Most of the time, people who become refugees are the businesspeople and the academics, the writers and the artists of their societies. They just had the misfortune to have gotten swept up in wars that they never wanted to be part of. So, in that sense, when you welcome refugees into America, you are taking in the most productive and most peaceful people from other lands. You are getting the best and brightest – and for a bargain price. Their talents add to America and its power. Economists have found this to be the case. A report by the *New American Economy* found that “refugees have an entrepreneurship rate that outshines even that of other immigrants.” They wrote: “The United States was home to more than 180,000 refugee entrepreneurs in 2015. That means that 13 percent of refugees were entrepreneurs in 2015, compared to just 11.5 percent of non-refugee immigrants and 9.0 percent of the U.S.-born population. The businesses of refugees also generated \$4.6 billion in business income that year.” Just to give you my own case, I started out as a casino janitor, went to college full time, earned a

BA and an MBA, and now I own and manage my own real estate business, all while working for a Fortune 500 company as a manager. Like other refugees, I've come a long way since the crocodiles of the Gilo River, all thanks to the opportunities available in the United States. Other refugees are eager for those opportunities as well. If you welcome them, they will further empower this amazing country. The data shows it.

***Third: refugees become great “ambassadors” for America.*** By that I mean, they provide a compelling form of public relations for our country. When I speak to family and friends in South Sudan, for example, I tell them about all the great things and opportunities in the United States. I excite them about this country. Conversations like these add up and, ultimately, help our country forge positive ties with other nations. People from other lands are able to *identify* with our country because they know that people like themselves live here. What refugees therefore provide America is a form of “soft power,” the power to persuade, the power to make others love our nation. Refugees are fabulous ambassadors.

To close, then, let me repeat my initial question: Why do the vast majority of Americans want to welcome refugees into the country? Besides the innate compassion of the American people, the answer is that Americans also know that refugees bring gratitude, and add talent to the workforce, and enhance America's diplomatic power. Those are the three broad reasons why I think most Americans welcome refugees into the country.

It has been an honor to share my thoughts with you. Thank you so much again for your time and consideration. May God continue to bless you and the rest of America.

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