U.S. Department of State

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FOR A HEARING ON

"OVERSIGHT OF THE UNITED STATES REFUGEE ADMISSIONS PROGRAM"

BEFORE
THE HOUSE COMMITTEE ON THE JUDICIARY
SUBCOMITTEE ON
IMMIGRATION AND BORDER SECURITY

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Chairman Labrador and distinguished members of Congress, thank you very much for holding this hearing on the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP). I appreciate the opportunity to address your Subcommittee with my colleagues from the Departments of Homeland Security (DHS) and Health and Human Services (HHS). Together, our agencies plan to bring up to 45,000 refugees to the United States through the USRAP in Fiscal Year 2018.

The security and welfare of the American people is this administration's top priority. We have instituted additional procedures in the USRAP application, interview and adjudication and systems checks processes to strengthen our vetting system.   We will continue to find ways to make our screening procedures more effective in order to protect the American people. In the year ahead, we will also redouble our efforts to work with state and local governments to expand their involvement in the process of determining the placement or resettlement of refugees in their jurisdictions.

In FY 2018, the United States expects to continue to permanently resettle more refugees than any other country, and we will continue to offer protection to the most vulnerable of those who have been persecuted because of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion. Since 1975, the United States has welcomed more than 3.4 million refugees, and the United States continues to operate the largest refugee resettlement program in the world.

Through the USRAP and our generous assistance programs for refugees in countries of first asylum, the United States' demonstrates its commitment to protecting the most vulnerable of the world's refugees while keeping America safe from harm.

The Need for the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), there are 65.6 million forcibly displaced people in the world today, 22.5 million of whom are refugees. The United States and UNHCR focus on three durable solutions to address the world refugee situation: voluntary repatriation, local integration, and resettlement to a third country. The United States and UNHCR recognize that most refugees desire safe, voluntary return to their homeland, and we share the UNHCR's priority of helping facilitate the voluntary repatriation of refugees in safety and dignity. In 2016, some 552,200 refugees

voluntarily repatriated to their countries of origin. Although this is more than double the number in 2015, it still unfortunately demonstrates that not enough refugee-producing countries have established the conditions to allow for safe and voluntary returns. Refugee repatriation operations have brought refugees safely home to Afghanistan, Sudan, Somalia, and Central African Republic, among others. These operations were carried out to protect returning refugees as well as to help them contribute to the stabilization, reconstruction, and development of their home countries.

For those refugees who are unable to voluntarily return safely to their home countries, the United States supports efforts to help refugees become self-sufficient and locally integrate into their countries of first asylum. The Department of State encourages host governments to protect refugees and to allow them to integrate into local communities. We promote local integration by funding programs to enhance refugee self-reliance and support community-based social services. Our support has enabled numerous refugees from around the world to integrate into their host communities abroad, even while awaiting eventual voluntary repatriation.

For refugees who are unable to return home safely or integrate locally, resettlement in third countries provides durable protection. In FY 2017, the United States offered resettlement to nearly 54,000 refugees, and we plan to welcome up to 45,000 refugees in FY 2018. This number accommodates the additional security procedures that will enable U.S. agencies to vet applicants more thoroughly for potential threats to public safety and national security. It also recognizes the need for USCIS to process asylum claims domestically for hundreds of thousands of claimants who already are in the United States.

Advancing National Security and Foreign Policy Objectives

For those eligible for protection as refugees, the USRAP is committed to deterring and detecting fraud among those seeking to resettle in the United States. We will continue rigorous security measures to protect against threats to our national security.

On July 31, 2017, the Government Accountability Office released a report, "Actions Needed by State Department and DHS to Further strengthen Applicant Screening Process and Assess Fraud Risks," that recommended that the Secretaries of Homeland Security and State conduct regular joint assessments of applicant fraud risk across the USRAP. In response to this report, the Department of State's

Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM) and DHS' Refugee, Asylum and International Operations Directorate and its Fraud Detection and National Security Directorate established a working group to create a Fraud Risk Analysis Framework that will serve as a guiding reference to conduct joint fraud risk assessments between the State Department and DHS. This framework will be consistent with leading fraud risk management practices and federal internal control standards.

As part of the Bureau's overall risk management policy, USRAP has several mechanisms in place to help prevent and detect fraud by USRAP applicants. This includes mandating that all of PRM's Resettlement Support Centers designate an anti-fraud official, train staff on fraud trends, and adhere to guidelines that prevent and mitigate internal malfeasance. PRM program officers conduct thorough monitoring and evaluation of all Resettlement Support Centers, with a particular focus on adherence to these program integrity guidelines.

The USRAP security vetting process is managed by DHS and includes the participation of the Departments of State and Defense, the FBI and the Intelligence Community, including the National Counterterrorism Center. DHS retains the authority to refuse refugees for admission. In response to Executive Order 13780, "Protecting the Nation From Foreign Terrorist Entry Into the United States," refugee admissions were suspended in FY 2017 for a period, with the exception of certain cases. During a 120-day period, the Departments of State and Homeland Security and the Office of the Director for National Intelligence, as well as additional intelligence and law enforcement agencies reviewed and enhanced the security screening regime for refugees.

I will highlight a number of the enhancements that we are in the process of implementing and will look to USCIS to discuss enhancements specific to DHS. As a result of our 120-day review, we will collect additional data from refugees during the application process to enhance the effectiveness of biographic security checks. We have improved the electronic refugee case management system to better detect potential fraud by strengthening the ability to identify duplicate identities or identity documents.

The Department of State and USCIS will exchange more in-depth information to identify refugee cases that are related to one another. This measure will enhance the USCIS officer's interview by providing the officer greater opportunity to develop specific lines of questioning to address potential fraud, national security, or public safety concerns.

Regarding security checks, we have updated policy guidance to ensure that any relevant changes to an applicant's critical data are subject to renewed security checks. This will add an additional layer of protection to identify fraud and national security issues. We have also expanded the criteria for which refugee applicants are subject to Security Advisory Opinions (SAOs) thereby ensuring that more refugees receive deeper vetting.

The initial 120-day review period ended October 24, 2017, allowing adjudication and admissions to continue. The program is currently in the midst of an additional review of nationals of countries with the potential for higher risk. We will conduct a detailed threat analysis and review for potentially higher-risk nationals of these countries and stateless persons who last habitually resided in those countries, including a threat assessment of each country, pursuant to the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), the Homeland Security Act of 2002, and other applicable authorities. During this review, the Secretary of State and the Secretary of Homeland Security will temporarily prioritize refugee applications from countries not considered to be higher risk. While the temporary review is underway, the Secretaries of Homeland Security and State will cooperate to carefully scrutinize the applications of nationals of countries that are potentially higher-risk, or of stateless persons who last habitually resided in those countries, and will consider individuals for potential admission whose resettlement in the United States would fulfill critical foreign policy interests, without compromising national security and the welfare of the United States. The Secretary of Homeland Security will admit on a case-by-case basis only refugees whose admission is deemed to be in the national interest and who are not known to pose a threat to the security or welfare of the United States.

Scale and Populations

During its history, the USRAP has responded to changing humanitarian needs. The program initially focused on resettling large groups concentrated in a few locations (primarily refugees from Indochina, the former Soviet Union, and the former Yugoslavia), but later shifted its focus and began to admit refugees representing over 50 nationalities per year. In FY 2017, the program admitted refugees of nearly 76 nationalities, with the largest numbers coming from Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Syria, and Burma, among others.

As Secretary of State Tillerson briefed Committee leadership on September 27, the United States plans to admit up to 45,000 refugees in Fiscal Year 2018. This number will include up to 19,000 refugees from Africa, 17,500 from Near

East and South Asia, 5,000 from East Asia, 2,000 from Europe and Central Asia, and 1,500 refugees from Latin America and the Caribbean.

Africa

In FY 2018, U.S. refugee resettlement from Africa will continue to include a diverse array of nationalities – some 30 in all. We will also continue to admit Sudanese, Ethiopians, and other African nationalities from displaced in countries like Egypt and Jordan.

East Asia

The USRAP in East Asia will continue to focus on Burmese refugees in Thailand and Malaysia. The resettlement of more than 100,000 Burmese refugees from Thailand since 2006 – including more than 87,000 to the United States – has significantly reduced the number of Burmese refugees in the camps who are eligible for U.S. resettlement. After more than a decade of large-scale U.S. resettlement from Thailand, the program will include fewer than 2,000 admissions this year. We will admit a roughly equal number of Burmese from Malaysia, including Rohingya. We have not been permitted by the Government of Bangladesh to resettle Rohingya from Bangladesh since 2012.

Europe and Central Asia

The USRAP in Europe and Central Asia focuses almost entirely on members of religious minorities from countries of the former Soviet Union who will be adjudicated under the reduced evidentiary standards of Lautenberg Amendment guidelines. Applications for the Lautenberg program have increased substantially since the Russia-initiated aggression against Ukraine.

Latin America and the Caribbean

In FY 2018, the Department of State and DHS will focus on more targeted refugee processing in Central America through the Protection Transfer Arrangement (PTA) with the Government of Costa Rica, UNHCR, and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). Through UNHCR and IOM, the U.S. government pre-screens vulnerable Salvadoran, Honduran, and Guatemalan applicants and transfers applicants who qualify for protection to Costa Rica, where they are interviewed by DHS and considered for resettlement to the United States. In some situations, the USRAP may decide to process UNHCR-identified cases in

one of three countries of origin.

The United States will also continue to assist vulnerable individuals in Central America through the Strategy for Engagement in Central America. Through this program, U.S. foreign assistance is helping to address the underlying economic, security, and governance reasons that Central Americans flee their countries.

Near East

In FY 2018, the USRAP will continue to demonstrate America's commitment to assisting victims of ISIS in northern Iraq and throughout the Middle East. The USRAP works closely with UNHCR on a program in Northern Iraq for survivors of ISIS atrocities, many of whom are Yezidi, Christian, and members of other religious minorities. The first refugee beneficiaries of this program arrived in the United States in September 2017. Since FY 2007, the United States has admitted over 141,200 Iraqi refugees. Two-thirds of these refugees have been referred by UNHCR and one-third have been admitted through our Direct Access Program (also known as P-2) for U.S.-affiliated Iraqi refugees.

Services and Support at the Community Level

The USRAP is premised on the idea that, upon resettlement in the United States, refugees should become economically self-sufficient as quickly as possible. The Department of State works domestically with agencies participating in the Reception and Placement (R&P) program to ensure that refugees receive services during the first 90 days after arrival in accordance with established standards. During and after the initial resettlement period, the Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Refugee Resettlement (HHS/ORR) provides technical assistance and funding to states, the District of Columbia, and nonprofit organizations to help refugees become self-sufficient and integrated into U.S. society. Under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), refugees are immediately authorized to work upon resettlement in the United States, and after one year in this country are required to apply for lawful permanent resident status. Five years after admission, a refugee who has been granted lawful permanent resident status is eligible to apply for citizenship and most do become citizens.

Thank you.