



Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children's Statement
Public Hearing on the President's FY2006 Refugee Admissions Program
July 13, 2005

The Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children ("Women's Commission") urges the Department of State to take all necessary steps to prioritize and effectuate the resettlement of Haitian refugees to the United States during FY06. Given the urgency of the situation in Haiti and the lack of alternative protection mechanisms in most of the Caribbean region, admitting Haitians as refugees to the United States, in particular Haitian women and children, is crucial. While we understand that resettlement is only one protection mechanism, it is certainly one that has been long overlooked as appropriate for some Haitians.

Background

Since former President Jean-Bertrand Aristide's departure on February 29, 2004, political, economic and human rights conditions in Haiti have continued to deteriorate. Hundreds of people – many of them civilians – have been killed in the violence and the country remains politically unstable with limited security. In addition to daily human rights abuses by the police and other armed factions, many Haitian civilians are being targeted for their political beliefs. Some experts believe that the upcoming elections in Haiti in October will only cause further problems and violence.

While, thousands of Haitians have sought protection from persecution in neighboring countries in the Caribbean, there is no meaningful protection framework for these refugees and asylees in the region. As highlighted in a recent report, the Dominican government has failed to implement an asylum system for Haitians seeking protection in the Dominican Republic that functions efficiently and fairly.¹ Other countries, such as the Bahamas, routinely detain and deport thousands of Haitians who arrive on their shores without adequate consideration of their asylum claims. Only Jamaica has been an exception and has offered temporary protection to Haitian refugees.

Due to limited budget resources, UNHCR Regional Office Washington has been unable to offer meaningful protection assistance to the refugees in this region. In fact, in most recent years, the office has operated with a budget of approximately \$200,000 for protection activities and refugee assistance for twelve countries in the region. UNHCR has had to drastically diminish, and at times eliminate, direct assistance to Haitians and other refugees that would be used to address their basic needs such as shelter, food and medical assistance.

Resettlement

The Women's Commission believes that resettlement can provide an orderly system to rescue Haitians at risk. Refugee women from Haiti are at particular risk and in need of protection. Many fit within the UNHCR definition as "those refugee women...who have protection problems and find themselves without the support of traditional protection mechanisms. Special needs of refugee women in such circumstances could derive from persecution, as well as from particular hardships sustained either in their country of

¹ International Rescue Committee, Women's Commission for Refugee Women and Children, Department of Medicine, Brown Medical School. Dominican Republic Delegation report. To be published July 2005.

origin, during their flight or in their country of refuge.”² For many Haitian women, resettlement may be the only way they can live their lives in safety and dignity.

We respectfully urge the Department of State to:

- Work with UNHCR to provide resettlement opportunities for Haitians in the United States by:
 1. Taking whatever steps are necessary – whether through P1 referrals or P2 designations – to offer Haitians this immediate protection.
 2. Considering in-country and/ or regional processing of Haitian refugees.
 3. Developing profiles of the population in the Dominican Republic, as well as for other small populations of Haitians who have sought protection in Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, St. Lucia and Dominica.
 4. Considering family and community ties in making placement decisions.
 5. Working with nongovernmental organizations to identify at-risk populations of Haitians in need of resettlement.
 6. Training NGOs to identify and refer at-risk refugees.
 7. Providing women at risk with resettlement opportunities.

- Work with UNHCR Geneva to increase and expand the capacity of its Washington Regional office to:
 1. Respond to the protection and assistance needs in the region.
 2. Resume humanitarian assistance for Haitian refugees and asylum seekers in the region.

- Start a dialogue with the Department of Homeland Security and other government agencies to discuss meaningful ways to provide protection to Haitian refugees.

Asylum as Protection

Finally, the Women’s Commission urges the State Department to ensure that Haitian refugees have adequate access to the U.S. asylum system as part of an overall comprehensive protection system. In 2003, the U.S. Coast Guard interdicted more than 2,000 Haitian asylum seekers at sea and summarily repatriated all of them giving virtually none an opportunity to claim asylum. Refugee advocacy organizations including the Women’s Commission are deeply concerned about the safety of returned asylum seekers as human rights organizations continue to document severe human rights abuses in Haiti. It is reported that as many as 350,000 people have been forced into hiding due to renewed persecution.

We urge the State Department to work with the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of Justice to ensure that Haitians who are interdicted at sea can disembark on dry land and be provided with a full and fair opportunity to present their refugee claims. Those who are found to be refugees should be resettled to the United States rather than third countries.

² UNHCR, Note on the Women-at-Risk Resettlement Criteria, UNHCR, June 5, 2000.