

February 17, 2005: Now, we're the persecutors - DesMoinesRegister.com

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February 17, 2005 America once was a country that took pride in sheltering refugees from persecution. Remember the satisfaction when defectors from the former Soviet Union, Cuba or communist China fled to freedom in the United States? Now it could not be more different. Many people seeking asylum are treated like criminals while they await hearings, a report mandated by Congress has found. Some are kept in solitary confinement, shackled or strip-searched, according to the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. These shameful conditions cry out for action. Congress should follow the bipartisan commission's recommendations to: 1) release people who pose no security risk, and 2) appoint a high-level protector of refugees to keep watch and address inequities. Inequities in the system, run by the Department of Homeland Security, include huge variation in who is granted asylum. Decisions have differed based on country of origin, where people entered the United States, the immigration judge who conducted their hearing and whether they had an attorney. Asylum seekers used to be detained only if they had criminal records. These are people who may have been tortured in their homelands. Now, most are confined with convicted criminals, sometimes for months, even years. The commission was charged with studying the effectiveness of U.S. asylum regulations, some of them established in response to the 1993 World Trade Center bombings. Clearly, we have not struck the proper balance between protecting national security and protecting people who may legitimately seek asylum. Meanwhile, any legislation to make it more difficult for refugees to receive asylum should be rejected. Since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, the number of asylum seekers has plummeted. Lady Liberty must be hanging her head.