



## **U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom Hearing**

### **Refugees Fleeing Religious Persecution**

Opening Remarks as prepared for delivery

#### **Vice Chair Bhargava**

Thank you very much, Vice Chair Perkins.

As Vice Chair Perkins mentioned, the U.S. refugee resettlement program is a vital lifeline for those fleeing religious persecution. I want to turn briefly to the asylum *process*. For the past two decades, USCIRF has conducted assessments and made recommendations regarding the asylum process. In particular, the International Religious Freedom Act authorized USCIRF to examine whether the Expedited Removal process was being implemented in a manner consistent with the United States' obligations to protect individuals fleeing persecution. USCIRF issued reports on expedited removal in 2005, 2007, 2013, and 2016, and documented

major problems and flaws that successive administrations have yet to address. The expedited removal process -increasingly in recent years – has been expanded and weaponized to prevent asylum seekers from even receiving asylum hearings. This use of the expedited removal process and the placement of asylum seekers in immigration detention facilities, coupled with many other measures, have raised additional concerns about the protections afforded to the most vulnerable and those fleeing religious persecution. Other measures include the implementation of the so-called “Muslim” ban that impacts countries and communities where religious violence and persecution have escalated; the slowing down of processing and the building of massive backlogs; and heightened, “extreme” vetting which raises questions, at minimum, about restrictions and biases towards those facing religious persecution. We look forward to hearing about, and engaging, with our witnesses on policy and process recommendations to address these concerns.

Ultimately, only a small number of the world’s almost 80 million displaced persons will resettle in a third country. For this reason, USCIRF has also continuously called on the U.S. government to support humanitarian efforts to aid refugees. To enhance these efforts, we will hear recommendations from our witnesses on how to improve overseas assistance to displaced populations and the communities hosting them, and how to help create conditions that would allow them to return home.

I would now like to briefly introduce our witnesses. I will keep my introductions short, so we can have as much time as possible for discussion. More detailed bios of the witnesses can be found on USCIRF's website.

Our first witness today is Jenny Yang, Senior Vice President of Policy and Advocacy at World Relief. Next, we will hear from Mark Hetfield, President and CEO at the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (or HIAS). Leon Rodriguez, who is an Immigration Attorney at Seyfarth and the former Director of U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, or DHS, will follow. Our fourth speaker will be Elizabeth Neumann, who is a Senior Advisor at the National Immigration Forum and former Assistant Secretary for Threat Prevention and Security at DHS. Lastly, we will hear from Murad Ismael, co-founder and former Executive Director at Yazda.

I now would like to give the floor to our esteemed witnesses. Ms. Yang, please begin.