



June 20, 2017

On World Refugee Day, Congress Should Renew Longstanding Bipartisan Commitment to Welcome and Resettle Refugees by Increasing Funding for Refugee Resettlement, Ending Family Detention, and Halting Expansion of Immigration Detention.

Dear Senator:

On behalf of Amnesty International USA, a non-partisan human rights organization with more than one million members and supporters in the U.S., I write on World Refugee Day to urge Congress to renew and redouble its longstanding commitment to welcome and resettle refugees from war-torn countries throughout the world.

Guided by the Refugee Convention and Convention Against Torture, Amnesty International advocates in the U.S. and internationally for laws that protect the human rights of all refugees. We strive to ensure that the U.S. and international community do not turn their backs on those who have fled persecution, torture, violence, or genocide.

The U.S. has a long and proud tradition of refugee protection and resettlement – a tradition that has been upheld by past presidents and Congresses, regardless of political party. Unfortunately the U.S. refugee system is now facing drastic cuts that could result in the decimation of a program that has protected vulnerable families, saved countless lives, and revitalized local economies.¹

The Trump administration's proposed cuts to the U.S. refugee program are coming at a time when 22.5 million refugees – *the highest numbers the world has ever seen* – are desperately seeking protection.² Despite these unprecedented numbers, only a tiny fraction of the world's refugees resettle in the U.S. In the face of this urgent humanitarian crisis, the U.S. must not back away from its long-established role as a leader in refugee protection. The U.S. government must do more – not less – to protect refugees fleeing war and persecution.

¹ *From Struggle to Resilience, The Economic Impact of Refugees in America* (Vol. June 2017, Rep.). (2017). New American Economy.

² United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. (2017, June 19). Global Trends Forced Displacement in 2016 - Media. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-2016-media.html>



Amnesty International USA recommends that Congress adopt the following policy recommendations to protect refugees and asylum seekers:

- (1) Press President Trump to drop his push to establish a Muslim and refugee ban. Despite numerous successive losses in various federal courts, the President continues to fight for a ban that would temporarily shut the United States' doors to refugees worldwide. Congress must make clear to the President that the United States' gates must remain open to vulnerable refugees in need of protection.
- (2) Welcome at least 75,000 new refugees to the U.S. in Fiscal Year 2018 ("FY18"). The Trump administration's proposal to resettle just 50,000 refugees would jeopardize the lives of tens of thousands of refugees and would represent an abdication of U.S. leadership on human rights and humanitarian assistance. At a time when the world is facing the worst refugee crisis in history, the U.S. government should commit to admitting and resettling at least 75,000 refugees – a modest number that falls far short of the 100,000 refugees admitted in each year of the George H.W. Bush presidency.³
- (3) Increase FY18 domestic funding for the U.S. refugee program, which is essential to giving refugees a strong start in their new lives in the U.S.

* Appropriate at least \$2.188 billion for the *Department of Health and Human Services ("DHHS") Refugee and Entrant Assistance* account, which funds the Office of Refugee Resettlement – a crucial component of fostering refugee integration and self-sufficiency.

- (4) Increase FY18 international funding for refugees and other forcibly displaced people and for the countries that host them.
 - Appropriate at least \$3.604 billion in funding for the *Department of State ("DOS") Migration and Refugee Assistance* account which provides overseas assistance to refugees, supports admissions to the U.S. of the most vulnerable refugees, and funds lifesaving services in humanitarian emergencies.
 - Reject the President's proposal to eliminate the *DOS Emergency Refugee and Migration Assistance* account. *Congress should maintain continued*

³ Newman, R. (2017, February 23). Admitting Refugees Makes America Great [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://www.aclu.org/blog/speak-freely/admitting-refugees-makes-america-great>



funding level of \$50 million.

- Reject the President’s proposed cut to the humanitarian and emergency accounts of the International Affairs Budget that would translate into an estimated 13 million people losing lifesaving food aid and 31.5 million people losing critical services during humanitarian disasters. Congress should appropriate at least *\$3.811 billion for USAID’s International Disaster Assistance* account, which specifically provides funding aimed at eradicating famine in South Sudan, Yemen, Nigeria, and Somalia.
- (5) End funding of family detention; decrease funding for immigration detention; provide funding for alternatives to detention. While the President aims to slash critical refugee funding for key accounts at DOS, USAID, and DHHS, his budget proposal seeks major additional funding for immigration detention, including detention of families seeking asylum in the U.S.
- In 2014 the U.S. government instituted mass *family detention* in response to the influx of Central American children and mothers entering the U.S. to escape rape, domestic violence, and brutal gang violence. The Department of Homeland Security (“DHS”) presently operates three family detention facilities: The Berks County Residential Center in Pennsylvania, the South Texas Family Residential Center, and the Karnes County Residential Center in Texas. Amnesty International has documented how some families at the Berks detention facility have been detained for over 600 days, with children spending a majority of their lives locked up by DHS as their mothers pursue political asylum claims. This inhumane policy of detaining families not only harms the health and well-being of children fleeing trauma but is also extremely costly to U.S. taxpayers.⁴ Congress should immediately cease funding of all family detention and call on the president to end the policy of family detention.
 - Over the last year the immigration detention population has exploded, shattering all-time records. President Trump’s FY18 budget seeks additional funding for an unprecedented 51,379 detention beds (compared with a seven-year norm of a maximum of 34,000 beds). Meanwhile the immigration detention system continues to be beset with reports of detainee deaths, dangerous substandard medical care,⁵ and sexual assault

⁴ American Academy of Pediatrics Urges Compassion and Appropriate Care For Immigrant and Refugee Children. (2017, March 13). Retrieved from <https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/pages/American-Academy-of-Pediatrics-Urges-Compassion-and-Appropriate-Care-For-Immigrant-and-Refugee-Children.aspx>

⁵ US: Detention Hazardous to Immigrants' Health. (2017, May 09). Retrieved from



complaints that never get investigated.⁶ *Congress should reject the President's requests for additional detention beds.*

- Individuals who flee to the U.S. seeking asylum are subject to mandatory and prolonged detention. In practice, this translates to asylum seekers being locked up by DHS for years while they pursue their claims through the courts. This harsh detention practice undermines access to asylum and is unlawful under international law, which mandates that the detention of asylum-seekers must be justified in each individual case, and courts must be able to review it. Detention of asylum-seekers should always be the last resort. Instead of increasing funding for detention beds, Congress should provide funding for *community-based alternatives to detention programs* for asylum-seekers.

On 2017 World Refugee Day, at a time when the world is grappling with the most severe refugee crisis in history, Amnesty International USA calls upon Congress to support policies and programs that continue the United States' longstanding bipartisan tradition of welcoming refugees, asylum seekers, and the most vulnerable in our midst.

For more information, please contact me at (202) 509-8151 or jlin@aiusa.org. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Joanne Lin
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Advocacy and Government Relations

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/05/08/us-detention-hazardous-immigrants-health>

⁶ Ali, S. S. (2017, April 12). Sexual Assaults in Immigration Detention Centers Rarely Get Investigated, Group Charges. Retrieved, from <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/sexual-assaults-immigration-detention-centers-don-t-get-investigated-says-n745616>