

Statement of
The Honorable Edward Kennedy

United States Senator
Massachusetts
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Edward M. Kennedy Statement on
Senate Judiciary Committee Hearing on
"The Plight of Iraqi Refugees"

Five years ago, Arthur Helton, perhaps this country's staunchest advocate for the rights of refugees wrote, "Refugees matter... for a wide variety of reasons... Refugees are a product of humanity's worst instincts - the willingness of some persons to oppress others - as well as some of its best instincts - the willingness of many to assist and protect the helpless... In personal terms, we care about refugees because of the seed of fear that lurks in all of us that can be stated so simply: it could be me."

A year later, Arthur Helton gave his life for his beliefs. He was killed in Baghdad in 2003 while meeting with UN Special Envoy Sergio Vieira de Mello when a terrorist bomb destroyed the UN headquarters in Iraq.

But his words resonate today, especially, as we consider the very human cost of the war in Iraq, and its tragic effect on -the millions of Iraqis -- men, women and children -- who have fled their homes and their country to escape the violence of a nation increasingly at war with itself.

Today, in Iraq, according to the High Commissioner for Refugees, 1.7 million people have been driven from their homes; up to 2 million have sought refuge in neighboring countries. At least 700,000 are in Jordan, 600,000 in Syria, 80,000 in Egypt, 54,000 in Iran and 20,000 in Lebanon. Thousands more are on the move daily. More than 10% of the people of Iraq are refugees. And, we will see increasing numbers as sectarian, ethnic and generalized violence continue unabated.

Like other aspects of the war, we bear a heavy responsibility for their plight. As the Iraq Study Group stated, "Events in Iraq have been set in motion by American decisions and actions." The Study Group concluded that if this refugee situation "is not addressed, Iraq and the region could be further destabilized, and the humanitarian suffering could be severe."

America must respond. Last year, however, the United States admitted only 202 Iraqi refugees. A special immigrant visa program for U.S. military Iraqi and Afghan translators currently has a six-year waiting list. We can do better than that.

The answer, of course, is not to bring every Iraqi refugee to the United States. But, we have a special obligation to keep faith with the Iraqis who have bravely worked for us - and have often

paid a terrible price for it - by providing them with safe refuge in the U.S. I hope this hearing will inform us all about how we might better assist Iraqis refugees and enable us to deal with it fairly and quickly.

We should work urgently with Iraq's neighbors, especially Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, who are bearing the greatest refugee burden. Prompt action is essential to prevent destabilization of the region, and to relieve suffering and save lives. An international conference sponsored by the countries in the region and the United Nations -could be a first step in addressing the growing needs of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons.

Our nation is spending \$8 billion a month to wage the war in Iraq. Yet to meet the urgent humanitarian needs of the refugees who have fled the war, the State Department plans to spend only \$20 million in the current fiscal year. The UNHCR has issued a \$60 million dollar appeal to fund its work with Iraqis for the next 12 months. Clearly, the United States should fund the bulk of that amount and take other steps to ease the burden on countries hosting large numbers of these refugees.

Our witnesses today will testify about personal stories of courage, loyalty, heroism and tragedy. They represent only a small number of countless stories of human indignity and suffering. Others have been criticized as traitors, infidels, and agents of the occupier. Some among them, such as Chaldean Christians, have long been persecuted for their religious beliefs. We owe a special duty to protect all of them and their loved ones who are being targeted by insurgents and sectarian death squads because of their faith or their association with the United States.

I thank Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey and the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees for being here and look forward to their plans for dealing with this extraordinary human tragedy. And we thank the other witnesses for sharing their stories of fear, cruelty and triumph. You are the human faces of this global problem.