

UNITED STATES COMMITTEE FOR REFUGEES



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2nd June, 1976.

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The Hon. Joshua Eilberg
Chairman, Subcommittee on Immigration,
Citizenship and International Law
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

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Dear Chairman Eilberg,

I am writing you on behalf of the United States Committee for Refugees with regard to the treatment of 1,500 Haitian refugees who fled to the United States for political and economic reasons. Cognizant of the fact that you have received correspondence concerning this important matter from numerous agencies and groups, among them the Lutheran Council of the U.S.A., the National Council of Churches, Congressman William Lehman of Florida, the American Friends Service Committee, Church Women United, Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and several other denominations and practising attorneys, the U.S. Committee for Refugees wishes to add its name to the formal request that you hold prompt and comprehensive hearings on policies, procedures and treatment affecting the lives of these fellow human beings.

While the U.S. Committee for Refugees in no way wishes to presume the final outcome of such hearings, we do feel that there are four separate issues involved with regard to Haitian refugees here in the U.S.:

1. In broad terms, all Americans want to operate in this our Bicentennial year in a humanitarian frame of reference. If our country could welcome 135,000 Vietnamese last year, can it not offer an equally generous embrace to 1,500 people from our own Hemisphere in 1976?
2. We believe your Subcommittee could very fruitfully receive testimony concerning INS procedure, which has received wide criticism among the voluntary agencies working to alleviate the poverty and desperation of those Haitian refugees who have fled to our shores.

The Hon. Joshua Eilberg
2nd June, 1976.

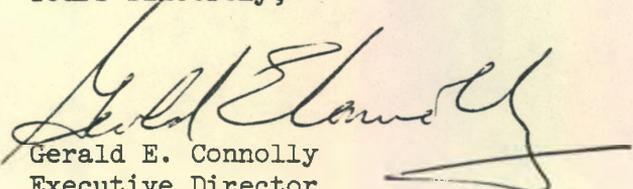
3. The third issue is the strict legal question involving the definition of a political, as opposed to an economic, refugee. On the one hand is the question of illegal immigration to the United States and on the other hand there exists the possible violation by our country of the 1967 U.N. Protocol which, for all practical purposes, made no distinction between exclusion and deportation. Specifically, we are concerned with U.S. violation of Article 31 of that Protocol.
4. Finally, there is the option of possible temporary measures aimed at alleviating the deprivation and incarceration of the refugees involved. We wish to lend our strong support to the recommendations you have already received from numerous agencies with regard to this latter issue, calling for the release of those currently under detention, the holding of hearings before an immigration judge to consider the merits of each case individually, possible temporary work authorisation for those awaiting hearings, and the assurance that normal refugee rights and services will be provided to those who are granted asylum.

It is with the deepest sense of distress and sadness that the U.S. Committee for Refugees notes affidavits and other evidence testifying to the fact that many Haitians who have fled to the United States are currently under detention, frequently in rank and inhuman conditions. We also note that you have received allegations stating that several refugees, after having been notified that they would be deported, committed suicide rather than face return to the political and economic realities of their homeland. Certainly, the diverse and sometimes conflicting evidence gathered so far warrants your prompt and intense scrutiny. We feel that early public hearings by your Subcommittee would provide an opportunity to examine the questions and allegations underlying this serious human drama taking place within our own country. At the very least such hearings will help clear the air of confusion and uncertainty surrounding these questions.

The United States has always been a haven for the oppressed and for the disadvantaged. Indeed, in 1976 we have reopened Ellis Island, New York as a monument to the U.S. commitment to those who have sought refuge here. Knowing of your concern, Congressman Eilberg, for the plight of those less fortunate than ourselves, we remain confident that you will hold fair and open hearings at an early date.

Hoping this letter finds you well, I am

Yours sincerely,


Gerald E. Connolly
Executive Director

Cc: Members and Staff, Subcommittee on Immigration, Citizenship and
International Law

GEC:mlw