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One Hundred and Twelfth Congress

## **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**

### **Statement of Rep. James P. McGovern**

#### **Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Hearing**

#### **“Protecting the Persecuted: The Successes and Challenges of Safeguarding Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons and Stateless Persons.”**

**334 Cannon HOB – Wednesday, October 26, 2011 – 10:00-11:30 AM**

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Good Morning, and thank you all for attending today’s hearing to commemorate this landmark year for the protection of Refugees, Internally Displaced Persons, and Stateless Persons. I would like to thank our witnesses for testifying today, and I would also like to thank Molly Hofsommer and the staff of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for organizing this hearing.

This year marks the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN Convention on the Status of Refugees, and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. These two conventions have been fundamental in establishing international protections for these vulnerable populations by enumerating their rights as well as codifying the legal obligations of states.

Since the enactment of the Convention on the Status of Refugees 60 years ago and a legal definition was established for the term “refugee,” an estimated 50 million people have received legal protections, and the principle of non-forcible return has become a fundamental principle of international law.

Likewise, since the enactment of the Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness 50 years ago, we have seen the creation of an international dialogue regarding the rights of stateless persons. The Convention on Statelessness has protected millions of people around the world who have

no legal bond of nationality, and often do not receive protection or government assistance from any state.

Despite the remarkable accomplishments made possible by these conventions, forced population displacement and statelessness remain major concerns worldwide. The UNHCR reports there are currently 36.4 million uprooted or stateless people around the globe, and unfortunately, the scope, complexity, and numbers of these issues continue to grow.

Responses and solutions to displacement are complicated by many factors. Weak states, insecurity, unstable social conditions, and economic crises are only a few examples of the many challenges facing governments, NGOs, and multilateral institutions whose function is to assist refugees, IDPs, and stateless persons. Protection efforts must be intensified, stronger partnerships established, and states encouraged to take concrete actions on behalf of these populations of concern.

I have had the opportunity, both when I worked as a congressional aide to Congressman Joe Moakley and now as a Congressman, to meet with many refugees and internally displaced people. Beginning in El Salvador in the 1980s, during that terrible civil war, I became very familiar with IDPs and refugees, mainly women and children, ripped from their homes by conflict and violence, and often just as vulnerable in camps, with their only protection the religious and humanitarian workers who provided them with shelter and aid.

I've visited the refugee camps in eastern Chad where over 300,000 people from Darfur have fled the violence and destruction of their homes in Sudan. With each year that passes, these camps become more permanent, while their populations continue to long for the chance to return home. Without the support of the international community, they would be even more destitute and their presence might not be tolerated by the Chadian government.

In my many travels to Colombia, I have made it a point to meet regularly with IDP leaders and their communities. Second only to Sudan, Colombia has nearly 4 million internally displaced people, presenting significant challenges to the Government and the international community. The overwhelming majority of IDPs have been forced by violence to abandon

their homes, moving primarily from rural areas to slums in nearby towns or major cities. I was in Medellín at the end of August, where entire districts, known as *comunas*, were created by displaced rural communities. Today, these neighborhoods are overwhelmed by criminal and gang violence and urban displacement is growing exponentially. In 2010, according to official figures, over 5900 people in Medellín were displaced by urban violence. In June, the Ombudsman for Medellín predicted that figure will likely double in 2011. Throughout Colombia, and indeed the world, urban displacement is a matter of increasing concern.

I am also the only Member of Congress to travel to the northern border region of Ecuador to review the situation of Colombian refugees there. Over one million Colombians have fled the violence in their country and sought refuge in all of Colombia's neighbors. This is a major humanitarian crisis, right here in our own hemisphere, yet it receives little attention and not enough resources.

Today, we will hear from representatives of the U.S. government, the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNCHR), and the NGO community. Today's witnesses will note the accomplishments of the UN Conventions, and make recommendations as to what more can and must be done to address the needs of the millions of people affected by displacement and statelessness.

It is my hope that this hearing will reinforce the critical need to advocate for the rights of refugees, IDPs, and stateless individuals, and strengthen global protections for them. The international community, and the United States, in particular cannot turn their back on these populations—for as the UNHCR states, one displaced person is one too many.

Again, I thank our witnesses for being here today. And I look forward to receiving your testimony.