



DEPARTMENT OF STATE
STATEMENT
OF
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BUREAU OF CONSULAR AFFAIRS
BEFORE THE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
TOM LANTOS HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION
HEARING
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Co-chairmen McGovern and Smith, and distinguished Members of the Commission

Thank you for the opportunity to be here and speak to you today on the work the Department of State does to prevent and resolve cases of international parental child abduction. Assisting American families who have been torn apart by the abduction of a child beyond our borders, and acting to prevent abductions before they happen, are among the most important work of the Department of State. I am grateful that you have given me the opportunity to describe our work on this critical matter.

My colleagues and I welcome your continued interest in the work we do to prevent and resolve international parental child abductions and recognize the importance of your advocacy on behalf of the impacted families. We look forward to our continued collaboration on our shared goals of preventing abductions, expeditiously resolving cases to return children, and strengthening and expanding our partnerships under the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction (Convention).

Diplomatic Efforts

After my previous testimony to Congress on this issue, it became clear to me that international parental child abduction was more than simply a “Consular” issue, and that we must do more to ensure that the entire Department was engaged. In pursuit of that goal, and in collaboration with the regional bureaus and our Missions abroad, we worked across the Department to create broad engagement strategies directed at countries cited as noncompliant in our 2019 Annual Report on International Child Abduction. We are now completing our second set of these strategies. However, I do want to be clear, although there is a focus on cited countries, we remain committed to the families of all abducted children, regardless of the country to which they have been taken, cited or not. Our team also works diligently to prevent

abductions from happening in the first place, and where prevention is not possible, to assist families in seeking return of their children and to improve conditions in every country to make these returns happen.

Regarding the engagement strategies themselves, I want to share where we are headed and what tools we are using, including Goldman Act actions. Each year, the Department works with the Department of Homeland Security to recertify the list of H-2 participant countries. Regulations governing the program state that the Department of Homeland Security designates eligible countries each year, with concurrence from the Secretary of State. A variety of factors go into the certification process. This year, for the first time, the Department will also include a country's status on the Annual Report on International Parental Child Abduction as a factor for consideration. The Department will consider not recommending countries designated as having a "pattern on noncompliance" in the IPCA report for inclusion in the H-2 eligible country list. This means that if a country is cited in the Annual Report on International Child Abduction, such citation may result in its removal from the H-2 eligible country list, and the Department would not recommend its inclusion in the list.

One of the tools articulated in the Goldman Act is the delay or cancelation of one or more bilateral working, official, or state visits. In the spirit of fully utilizing that tool while continuing to engage with foreign governments on international parental child abduction, where appropriate we will insist that this issue be placed on the agenda and make it part of bilateral discussions where it might not otherwise have been. For example, we might insist that child abduction matters be included before we agree to hold a bilateral security discussion meeting. I believe this will send a strong message that addressing child abductions is critically important to our government. Our engagement will be persistent and forceful.

Another Goldman Act tool we are taking a deeper look into this year is the use of official public statements. Although we will always balance the advantage of speaking publicly with the need to work as diplomats behind the scenes, where appropriate we will publicly highlight those countries which are not effectively addressing international parental child abduction, as the families involved deserve.

Beyond the engagement strategies, we are constantly engaged all over the world with foreign partners to improve compliance on international parental child abduction. Some actions I would like to highlight include: our Special Advisor for Children's Issues, Suzanne Lawrence, traveled to Egypt in May to discuss compliance issues and advocate for Egypt's ratification of the Hague Abduction Convention. Also in May, the Special Advisor traveled to Taiwan to engage relevant stakeholders in Taipei and to commemorate the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on international parental child abduction. This Memorandum works to improve our collaboration with the authorities on Taiwan.

Continued Efforts for Resolutions

Alongside these efforts to improve cooperation with our partners, we work no less diligently to resolve individual abduction cases. We continue to use all appropriate tools to help facilitate the resolution of abduction cases globally.

I particularly want to flag one recent example of success in a cited country. In June, four abducted children from two families returned to the United States from Lebanon. This came about after significant engagement by the Department, including our embassy in Lebanon and our ambassador in Beirut, as well as other U.S. government agencies and Members of Congress. These children returned pursuant to Lebanese court orders, a first for the country. Going forward, our engagement strategy with Lebanon will be focused on reinforcing this positive

development so that other families can benefit in the future. Thank you, again, to Congressman Smith, Congressman Posey, and Senator Rubio who engaged on those cases – your support was greatly appreciated.

Prevention

I believe, as you all do, that preventing abductions before they occur is the best course of action. In the Office of Children's Issues, we have a dedicated team focused on preventing international parental child abduction, and I am proud of the work they do in close collaboration with U.S. law enforcement, especially U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). I would like to highlight certain elements of this work. In 2018, the Prevention Branch fielded over 5,200 prevention-related inquiries, nearly a 50 percent increase over 2017. Since its inception, we have enrolled over 45,000 children in the Department's Children's Passport Issuance Alert Program (CPIAP).

Separately, we work with CBP on their Prevent Abduction Program to stop abductions in progress. Through this program, CBP creates travel alerts for children who are the subject of a valid, enforceable U.S. court order indicating the child is prohibited from being removed from the United States. CBP continuously monitors Advance Passenger Information System (APIS) data in real-time on passengers traveling to and from the United States using commercial carriers and vets that information against the travel alerts. If a child enrolled in the Prevent Abduction Program attempts travel abroad on a commercial carrier, their travel alert data will match against their APIS data, and CBP will be notified automatically. Once travel is identified, CBP officers notify my team, and CBP officers coordinate with law enforcement at the airport, seaport, or land border Ports-of-Entry on intercepting the child before departure. Since the passage of the

Goldman Act, this highly successful program has been able to stop the abduction-in-progress of dozens of children to countries such as Mexico, China, and Jordan.

In 2018, we helped enroll 236 children into CBP's Prevent Abduction Program, an increase of 12 percent over 2017. Thus far in 2019, we have surpassed the number of enrollments and are on track for a 44 percent increase over the previous year. Our prevention officers are available around the clock, and through our broad public affairs campaign we encourage parents to reach out to us for information that can help stop abductions before they happen.

Collaboration

The interagency collaboration I highlighted with CBP is critically important to our work. We also pursue opportunities to work throughout the U.S. government and in particular with law enforcement. We collaborate at the policy level through regular meetings of the Prevention Interagency Working Group, which last met in April of this year. Participants include the FBI, the Department of Justice, the U.S. Marshals Service, the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and others. We also work together in our day-to-day casework and hands-on outreach.

Making sure parents and other stakeholders are aware of our message and the tools available to prevent and resolve an international child abduction is a critical component of the Bureau of Consular Affairs' public engagement and outreach activities. Centered around National Missing Children's Day in May this year, for several weeks before and after this national commemoration, my team traveled across the United States, meeting with Congressional constituent services staffers, judges, attorneys, law enforcement, foreign consulates, and the general public. These events reached hundreds of individuals. In the same

time frame, the Director of the Office of Children's Issues traveled to Atlanta to co-present with the FBI and the Department of Justice at the National Law Enforcement Training on Child Exploitation to help state and local law enforcement agencies develop an effective response to reports of international child abductions.

Likewise, international parental child abduction is more than just an issue of concern for the executive branch and Congress. We work closely with our four U.S. Hague Network Judges to help strengthen the Hague Abduction Convention around the world. In that vein, I am pleased to inform you that this week, one of our U.S. Hague Network Judges, a California state court judge, is in Ecuador training judges on the Hague Abduction Convention.

Conclusion

Co-chairmen McGovern and Smith, distinguished Members of the Commission; the Goldman Act has significantly reinforced our work to address the complex problem of international parental child abduction.

We constantly strive to increase our effectiveness and always look for ways to collaborate with our partners, including you, Members of Congress, who have committed so much time and energy to addressing this very important and urgent issue.

Thank you.