

March 29, 2004

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The Honorable Jim Kolbe
Chairman
House Foreign Operations Subcommittee
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Kolbe:

We, the undersigned members of InterAction concerned with protection and assistance to refugees and displaced persons, are writing to respectfully request that you include increases for the Migration and Refugee Assistance account (MRA) and the Emergency Migration and Refugee Assistance (ERMA) account in the FY 2005 Foreign Operations Appropriations Bill.

We urge you to include a significant increase in the MRA account, which has been cut overall by almost \$26 million in the President's fiscal year 2005 budget request. The MRA account funds both overseas assistance and refugee resettlement. Within the MRA account, overseas assistance has been slashed by \$100 million from a FY 2003 figure of \$625 million to a FY 2005 request of \$525 million. We have attached for your convenience an MRA summary statement produced by the State Department that includes a breakdown of overseas assistance by region to illustrate which programs will be most affected.

The funding from the U.S. Government for the MRA account provides protection and life-sustaining relief for refugees and conflict-affected populations throughout the world. Much of the funding goes to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which uses non-governmental organizations as implementing partners and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Funding from MRA has supported the voluntary return and sustainability of over 2.8 million refugees in Afghanistan and 700,000 internally displaced persons. In Sierra Leone, MRA funds contributed to the return and reintegration of 400,000 Sierra Leoneans.

Remaining challenges exist in many parts of the world, including Thailand where roughly 450,000 Burmese refugees reside and in Colombia where two million people, the majority of whom are women and children, have been internally displaced since 1995 and which continues to generate refugees seeking asylum in neighboring countries.

Continued efforts to address gender-based violence, which affects refugees and displaced persons on a global scale, are critical. Tragically, only \$2 million is available in FY 2004 in the MRA account to target gender-based violence and to integrate programs that address this problem into existing MRA-funded activities.

With respect to the ERMA account, we urge you to recommend a level of funding of \$50 million. The refugee assistance community is greatly concerned that crises this year, such as the flow of refugees from the Darfur region of Sudan to Chad, could have a severe and adverse impact on ERMA funding levels. It is not only prudent, but necessary, for us to be ready to respond to future crises.

We appreciate the continued support of the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations of the House Appropriations Committee for the protection and assistance of refugees. On a bipartisan basis, the Subcommittee on Foreign Operations has consistently supported refugee assistance both overseas and through the US resettlement program. This funding helps to create the structure that enables non-governmental organizations to be effective partners on initiatives that provide protection and assistance to refugees around the world. We hope you will restore and increase funding to the Migration and Refugee Assistance and the Emergency Migration and Refugee Assistance accounts in FY 2005 in order to meet current needs and future challenges.

Thank you for considering this request and for the support you have shown for refugees around the world.

Sincerely,

Adventist Development and Relief Agency International
Africare
Air Serv International
American Near East Refugee Aid
American Refugee Committee
Catholic Relief Services
Congressional Hunger Center
Ethiopian Community Development Council
Heart to Heart International
Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society
Immigration and Refugee Services of America/U.S. Committee for Refugees
International Medical Corps
International Orthodox Christian Charities
International Rescue Committee
Jesuit Refugee Service/USA
Korean American Sharing Movement
Lutheran World Relief
Mercy Corps
Mercy-USA for Aid and Development
Oxfam America
Physicians for Human Rights
Presbyterian Church (USA), Washington Office
Refugees International
United Methodist Committee on Relief
World Relief