

**INTERFAITH STATEMENT IN SUPPORT OF
COMPREHENSIVE IMMIGRATION REFORM:
ADDENDUM ON ASYLUM**

July 10, 2006

We, the undersigned faith-based leaders and organizations, join together to call upon President Bush and our elected officials in Congress to ensure that any bill aiming to reform our immigration system preserves the United States' longstanding commitment to provide safe haven to those fleeing persecution. Our diverse creeds and cultural heritages teach us to respect the distinctly American pledge engraved into the Statue of Liberty: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free."

In October 2005, the faith-based community called for comprehensive immigration reform legislation that establishes a safe and humane immigration system consistent with our values. This directive stems from our diverse faith traditions that teach us to welcome our brothers and sisters with love and compassion. Those same traditions also teach us to stand up for and protect the weak and oppressed in our midst. The Hebrew Bible urges us to actively free the enslaved and rescue the oppressed: "Loosen the bonds of wickedness; untie the bands of the yoke; send the oppressed free, and break every yoke (Isaiah 58:6)." Similarly, the New Testament tells us to "proclaim freedom for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind" and "to release the oppressed to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4:18-19)." The Qur'an tells us that we should "serve God...and do good to...orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, and wayfarer that you meet, [and those who have nothing] (4:36)."

The United States has long been a leader in the protection of refugees at home and abroad. Yet in the past decade we have noticed a discouraging trend in legislation and regulations, making our laws more difficult to navigate by victims of persecution who are most often empty-handed, traumatized, and separated from their loved ones. This trend has only been amplified in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, as restrictionists have erroneously conflated those perpetrating terror with those fleeing terror.

Changes to U.S. law in recent years have excluded some of the most vulnerable refugees and asylum seekers from the United States' protection because they have given "material support" to terrorists, even though that support was given under extreme duress or the result of a legitimate, recognized attempt to resist oppression and tyranny. This overbroad policy victimizes the Sierra Leonean woman who was raped and whose home was forcibly seized by rebels, the Colombian father who paid ransom so the FARC would not kill his son, and the Burmese daughter of a man who bravely fought one of the most repressive regimes in the world. This policy undermines the American and religious tradition of welcoming victims of persecution "yearning to breathe free."

We also call attention to the harmful provisions in the House- and Senate-passed bills that needlessly chip away at the asylum system. Both bills would criminalize asylum seekers who use false documents to flee their persecutors. Forging documents to escape a tyrannical regime can be consistent with a higher law; consider the thousands of European Jews who escaped the Holocaust on passports forged by righteous gentiles. Both bills would also increase the detention of asylum seekers that pose no risk to this country's security and mandate the expansion of the "expedited removal" process, even though the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom found that the process is rife with errors. The House bill, H.R.4437, would criminalize asylum seekers who fall out of status while preparing their asylum applications *and* the humanitarian workers who assist them. We support the government's right to ensure that the asylum system is not abused, yet this goal must be achieved without further traumatizing victims

of religious and other persecution, and putting them at risk of wrongful return to those who mean them harm.

As faith-based leaders and organizations, we call on our elected officials to uphold this nation's tradition of asylum and reject any attempts to enfeeble that tradition through the guise of immigration reform. We remind the government that America is culturally and spiritually enriched by the refugees and asylees who call this country their home -- who have endured suffering to stand up for the American-cherished principles of democracy and freedom, and who have persevered through hate and persecution to rebuild their lives in this great nation.

Specifically, we ask that Congress:

1. Develop a robust solution to make certain that innocent refugees and asylum seekers are not denied our protection due to the "material support" bar;
2. Ensure that asylum seekers who use false documents to seek refuge in the U.S. are not prosecuted unless the application was made in bad faith;
3. Support legislation, such as the "Secure and Safe Detention and Asylum Act" introduced by Senators Brownback and Lieberman, that safeguards asylum seekers from unnecessary detention in jail-like conditions and ensures that asylum seekers subject to expedited removal are no longer at significant risk of being returned to their persecutors; and
4. Promote policies and legislation that upholds, rather than undermines, the American tradition of providing refuge to those who flee religious and other forms of persecution.

National Organizations:

American Jewish Committee
Anti-Defamation League
B'nai B'rith International
Catholic Charities
Chaldean Federation of American
Church World Service Immigration and Refugee Program
Episcopal Migration Ministries
Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society
Sisters of Mercy of the Americas
Jesuit Refugee Service/USA
Jewish Council for Public Affairs
Jubilee Campaign USA
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
National Advocacy Center of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd
NETWORK--A National Catholic Social Justice Lobby
Progressive Jewish Alliance
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee (UUSC)
United Jewish Communities
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society
Workmen's Circle/Arbeter Ring

Local Organizations:

Jewish Community Action from St. Paul, MN

Jewish Community Council of Metropolitan Detroit
Jewish Community Relations Council of Southern Arizona
Jewish Federation of Greater Philadelphia
UJA-Federation of New York, Inc.
Workmen's Circle of Northern California

Individual Faith Leaders:

Rev. Antonio (Tony) Aja, Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, NY, New York

The signatories on this statement were updated July 10. This statement remains open for sign-on by faith-based organizations, denominations, individual places of worship, and individual faith leaders. To endorse, please contact Stephanie Faith Green: Stephanie.faith.green@hias.org or 202-828-5115.