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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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USCR Calls on Bhutan and International Community to Uphold Bhutanese Refugees' Right to Return and to Ensure Durable Solutions for all Bhutanese Refugees

Katmandu, Nepal, July 28, 2003—Concluding a week-long site visit to Nepal today, the U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR) expressed full support for all Bhutanese refugees' right to return to their homeland. USCR further called on Bhutan and the international community to ensure full rights for all returning refugees, including citizenship, restoration of their lands and property, and international monitoring to ensure the returnees' safety and well-being.

USCR visited four of the six refugee camps in eastern Nepal that house more than 100,000 refugees and met with large groups of camp leaders as well as many individual refugee families, including families in Khudunabari camp who have already been "categorized" by the Joint Verification Team. The categorization process is intended to identify candidates for repatriation by separating them into four groups.

USCR Communications Director Hiram A. Ruiz, who first visited the Bhutanese refugees in Nepal in 1992, when most of the refugees were first expelled from Bhutan, said, "Refugees have a basic right to return to their homeland. Yet the verification process and categorization that Bhutan is imposing on the refugees with Nepalese acquiescence and without the participation of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is clearly biased and unfair.

The results in the first camp where verification took place clearly demonstrate the inherent arbitrariness of the process. "The process was, in effect, a sham," said Ruiz. Less than three percent of the refugees were placed in Category 1 (genuine Bhutanese citizens). The vast majority of the refugees were placed in Category 2 (the unjustifiable "emigrated voluntarily" category, in which returning refugees would have to re-apply for citizenship after two years of "probation" and are not guaranteed any basic rights), or were declared "non-Bhutanese" (Category 3), despite many of them having proof of their Bhutanese citizenship.

"It is evident that Bhutan intended the verification process to prevent and discourage repatriation rather than facilitate it," said Ruiz. The absence of safeguards for refugees who return, the requirement of re-applying for citizenship for refugees in Category 2, Bhutan's refusal to commit to return the property it confiscated from the refugees, and its rejection of international monitoring of the return all make it very difficult for the refugees to fulfill their deeply-held desire to return home.

"USCR will undertake every effort to encourage the U.S. government and the international community, including India-whose influence with both Bhutan and Nepal could be pivotal-to urge Bhutan to permit the safe return of the refugees and to restore their rights as citizens of Bhutan," Ruiz said. "However," he added, "Bhutan's actions over the past 14 years, from its expulsion of the refugees to the verification and categorization process, suggest that it may continue to take a hard line and refuse to respect the refugees' basic rights."

Should the international community fail to ensure that Bhutan permits the refugees' repatriation in safety and in dignity, Ruiz added, "then the international community, led by UNHCR, must assume responsibility for helping the refugees find other durable solutions. The refugees have spent 12 years in these camps. A whole generation has grown up knowing nothing but life in a refugee camp. They must be given a future."

Repatriation is what the Bhutanese and other refugees worldwide want and should be able

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to pursue. But when repatriation is not possible, UNHCR and the international community generally promote two other durable solutions, namely local integration and third-country resettlement.

Nepal has said that it would permit the local integration of some of the refugees who cannot return home. That is a welcome, just, and generous offer. But Nepal alone cannot and should not be expected to assume full responsibility for other durable solutions. Others in the international community, including the United States, India, and European Union members, must also offer to help, including by providing resettlement opportunities.

"While USCR urges that these other durable solutions be possible for the Bhutanese refugees," Ruiz added, "we emphasizes the refugees' right to return to their homeland in safety and dignity and will continue to work vigorously to promote that right."

The U.S. Committee for Refugees (USCR) is a public information and advocacy program of Immigration and Refugee Services of America (IRSA), a nongovernmental, non-profit organization. Since 1958, USCR has defended the rights of refugees, asylum seekers, and internally displaced persons worldwide.

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