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President Bush Finally Speaks the Truth about America's Unlawful Treatment of Haitian Refugees

Washington, DC, February 26, 2004—On Wednesday, making his first public comments on the crisis in Haiti, President Bush announced: "We will turn back any refugee that attempts to reach our shore, and that message needs to be very clear as well to the Haitian people." The President's statement constituted the first time in more than 50 years that the U.S. has flagrantly rejected the legal and ethical obligation to protect refugees.

"Our President has finally spoken the truth about American practice toward Haitian refugees," stated Lavinia Limón, Director of USCR. "For years we have witnessed the unfair, discriminatory treatment of Haitian refugees, but now the President is publicly admitting that the U.S. does not obey international law."

The forcible repatriation of refugees directly violates Article 33 of the 1951 UN Convention on refugees, which proclaims that no "State shall expel or return a refugee in any manner whatsoever . . . where his life or freedom would be threatened . . ." Moreover, this principle-known as non-refoulement-had acquired the status of customary international law, i.e., a fundamental norm that no state claims the right to violate. "With a single phrase, the President has rolled back more than 50 years of American refugee law and practice," said Limón. "He is sending a signal to the rest of the world that it is okay to turn a blind eye to persecution and to force refugees back into harm."

Only days before issuing his statement, the President evacuated all non-essential personnel from the island country and deployed 50 marines to guard the American Embassy. Yet even as the United States government took these extraordinary protective measures, it continued to interdict Haitians at sea and deport Haitian asylum seekers, including a man whose case is being reviewed by the Supreme Court.

USCRI is deeply concerned about the impact President Bush's statement will have on other nations. "The President has weakened the United States' moral authority to hold accountable those countries that regularly violate human rights," said Limón.

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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