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USCR CALLS FOR THE PROTECTION OF HAITIAN REFUGEES FLEEING VIOLENCE

WASHINGTON, DC, February 24, 2004—With the violence in Haiti escalating and no political solution in sight, the U.S. Committee for Refugees calls upon the government of the United States to ensure that Haitian refugees fleeing persecution will receive the necessary protection.

USCR deplors the violent attacks on civilians by both Aristide supporters and the armed opposition. All sides in the upheaval must work to stop the bloodshed that has already claimed 70 lives and generated tens of thousands of displaced persons within Haiti. The Bush Administration, unable to mediate a political solution with the diplomatic team it sent last week, can no longer delay preparations to protect Haitians fleeing the violence. Incredibly, the Administration deported a Haitian asylum seeker on the same day it ordered the evacuation of all non-essential American personnel from the island.

"The United States has failed to honor Haitians' rights to seek refuge," said Lavinia Limón, USCR Executive Director. U.S. policy on Haitians has consistently violated international legal norms, denying them fair access to the U.S. asylum process, interdicting them at sea, and subjecting them to forced repatriation or indefinite detention. "The Bush Administration must reevaluate its discriminatory policies, especially the infamous asylum 'shout test,'" said Limón, referring to the long-standing requirement that Haitians detained on Coast Guard vessels shout out loud their claim to asylum. Cubans and Chinese, by contrast, are automatically afforded an initial asylum screening.

Within the past few weeks the U.S. government has continued to intercept boatloads of Haitians at sea and has forcibly returned them without any screening for asylum. Under the Bush Administration's policy, those recognized as asylum seekers are detained until the completion of their asylum determination, a proceeding that can last years. Already, the U.S. government is discussing a plan to house a projected outflow of Haitian refugees at the U.S. military base at Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, the same facility used for detaining alleged terrorists post 9/11.

USCR urges the U.S. government to establish a refugee processing program for Haitians in cooperation with the Dominican Republic. The United States can address both its own security concerns and its obligation to protect refugees by coordinating an intergovernmental process that will ensure order and secure the safety of persecuted Haitians. Said Limon, "the U.S. cannot ignore the needs of Haitian refugees only a few hundred miles from our own shores."

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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