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USCR and Refugees International Write UN High Commissioner for Refugees Expressing Grave Concern about UNHCR Facilitation of Premature Repatriations of Myanmar (Burmese) Refugees from Thailand

Accompanying a U.S. congressional delegation on a fact-finding trip to Thailand and the Thai-Myanmar border in February 2004 to review the situation of uprooted Myanmar refugees, USCR policy analyst Veronika Martin was deeply disturbed by UNHCR's cooperation with Myanmar's State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) to prepare areas for the return of refugees to eastern Myanmar.

Participating in the trip, which was sponsored by the U.S. Campaign for Burma and Christian Freedom International, were staff from the offices of Senator Jon S. Corzine (D-NJ) and Representatives Joseph Crowley (D-NY), Mark Souder (R-Ind), and Mark Steven Kirk (R-Ill). The trip included meetings with activists for democracy and human rights in Myanmar including Senator Kraissak Choonhavan, Chairman of the Thai Senate's Committee on Foreign Affairs.

The delegation focused on the Thai-Myanmar border, where refugee camps and Myanmar support groups are located. Congressional staff met with representatives of the Thai Ministry of Interior, which facilitated a trip to Mae Lae Refugee camp. Additional meetings took place with refugees, internally displaced persons' groups, and persons engaged in human rights and humanitarian work. They confirmed that human rights violations continue in eastern Myanmar, from which an estimated 2,500 people per month continue to flee to Thailand. But current peace talks between the Karen National Union and the Myanmar regime, and pressures from Thai authorities, set the stage for premature returns to ethnic areas in 2004.

As a result of research conducted on this trip, and in light of UNHCR's recent Standing Committee statement on its operations in Asia and the Pacific, USCR and RI believe that any preparation for repatriations to eastern Myanmar is unwise and premature and sends the wrong message to refugees already under pressure to return to Myanmar.

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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