

Remarks by Deputy National Security Advisor Avril Haines Commemorating World Refugee Day

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Good afternoon. Thank you so much, Eleanor, for that kind introduction. I've been fortunate to know and work with Human Rights First for a long time. You push us and make us better in all sorts of ways—but what I particularly respect about Human Rights First is that you work to make a difference; to have a tangible impact on people's lives, which is a worthy challenge. And the issue I am here to discuss is a very good case in point.

Next Monday marks World Refugee Day, and as President Obama said last year, it is a moment “to reflect on the millions around the world who have been displaced from their homes—the hardships they face, the courage and resilience they demonstrate, and the dedication of those who come to their aid.” It's hard to fathom the pain and loss so many refugees carry with them. It's hard to imagine what it must feel like to leave your home suddenly—fleeing violence.

The President received a remarkable letter from a young boy on this topic last year that I would like to share parts of with you today. His eloquence does more to give a voice to refugees everywhere than anything I could say.

He wrote:

Dear President Obama,

My name is Ahmad and I am 9 years old. I am a Syrian boy from the countryside of Aleppo, where my family and me used to live in a home built by my dad. He used to build houses with his own hands, and I used to watch him work.

Then the regime put out an order for my dad to be taken into custody, because he wanted freedom. My home was bombed. We lost our house and everything, but I thank God we were not home when it happened. We went to live with our grandparents, but then their home got bombed, too. Daesh forces were getting closer to our village, and we heard what they were doing to people. They would kill men like my dad in a very bad way. I was scared, but my dad told me he would fix things. He told me that with God's help that we would be safe.

So we moved. My dad took my siblings and my mother, and we all left the village where I was born. We moved to a camp for Syrian families like us, about 50 kilometers away.

All we had was each other. We had lost everything else.

After a few months, something really bad happened, but thank God for everything. I was playing with my siblings, when a MiG plane came over our camp, and dropped a bomb right at my tent. I remember the screaming and the blood. There was so much blood.

My dad came running from another tent. I still hear my mother's screams when I wake up at night. Three of my siblings got killed. I almost died. Both of my arms were almost cut off. I get bad nightmares, but I am fine now, thank God. The Free Syrian Army, who tried to protect us, came and drove me off to the Turkish border, so I could get medical care and not die. It took five days before my dad could reach Turkey and find me. I was so scared I remember everything. I didn't see my mom for a very long time, but my dad was there.

Now, I have no arms. I was so sad, but my dad told me to be patient. He said, "Be patient, Ahmad, even with no arms, there is nothing you cannot do." I love my dad, but I miss my arms. I miss playing and going to the bathroom alone. I miss eating alone. I don't complain. I know my dad is sad even if he doesn't show me. So I don't complain.

Thank God. I have been in Boston now for five months. I hope to get new arms. I love my doctor who can give me new arms, and I hope we can stay. I want my dad to be happy. I want my family to be safe...

My dream is to get new arms and see my mom again. I want to see her smile. After my mom smiles, everything will be good again. My dad tells me that I will build a new, free Syria with my voice. I like that. I want to tell Syrians about freedom. I want to tell the world about freedom.

If I get new hands I want to shake everyone's hands so we can build a new Syria together. I want to shake your hand, Mr. President. I hope we can meet.

In Freedom, Ahmad.

Most people hear Ahmad's words and feel the desire to act—whether it is out of the generosity of their heart, because they view it as a moral imperative, or because that part of who we are as Americans—our country is and always has been a refuge for people like

Ahmad. When we see images of families crossing dangerous deserts, or a young boy's body washed up on a beach, we can't help but feel that we must reach out.

But some are concerned that our refugee program will make us more vulnerable to terrorism—and we have to take that concern seriously. The President hears from people on both sides of this issue, and what I want to talk to you about today is why I believe that our refugee policy, rather than undermining our national security, actually increases it. Why increasing the number of refugees that we resettle in the United States every year is not only the right thing to do, but good policy and a smart investment in our future. I also want to highlight the fact that our refugee program is one small but important part of a much broader effort to address what is an unprecedented global migrant crisis that is likely to be with us for many years to come, which means we had better get this right. I will try to give you a sense of what we are doing, how we are working with other countries and with the private sector to address the challenge, and to thank many of you in this room for your own contributions to these efforts and for what you are doing to try to change the public debate on these issues.

Let me start with a few facts that reflect the scope of the crisis. Right now, as you no doubt know, more than 60 million people around the globe—roughly one in every 122 people on earth—qualify as displaced persons. That's more than at any time since World War II. Over half of them are, like Ahmad, under the age of 18, over 20 million are refugees and over 10 million are “stateless.” At its core, the sharp increase in people seeking refuge over the last several years is the consequence of rising violence, political repression, insecurity and limited economic opportunities, combined with a proliferation of human smuggling networks and enhanced global mobility.

While Syrian refugees are the largest national group and receive the lion's share of the headlines, we cannot forget those fleeing from South Sudan, Sudan, Iraq, Somalia, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, Central America, Afghanistan, Burma, Ukraine, and Eritrea. In fact, Afghanistan—after Syria—is the second largest source country of refugees worldwide and the numbers are not decreasing. Sub-Saharan Africa—not Europe or the Middle East—hosts the largest number of refugees, followed by Asia and the Pacific, which hosts nearly 4 million refugees.

You can see that this is a global crisis and although we often talk about the terrible pressure it is putting on our allies in Europe, this is only one part of the problem. In brief, the migrant crisis fundamentally threatens to destabilize regions and collapse fragile states that ultimately may develop into far more pernicious national security threats to the United States.

As President Obama put it at the UN General Assembly last September, “in the old ways of thinking, the plight of the powerless, the plight of refugees, the plight of the marginalized did not matter. They were on the periphery of the world's concerns. Today, our concern for them is driven not just by conscience, but should also be driven by self-interest. For helping people who have been pushed to the margins of our world is not mere charity, it is a matter of collective security.”

First, it's essential that we address this migrant crisis because failing to do so can breed further instability. Many of the frontline countries that hosts substantial numbers of refugees lack the resources to care for refugees effectively. The burdens associated with hosting large refugee populations often worsen existing problems—including poverty, ethnic and communal tensions, environmental degradation, and weak political institutions. We've seen the nations of Europe, with highly-developed economies and a population of 500 million people, struggle with the challenges of absorbing the 1 million migrants and refugees that reached European shores last year. Now consider that over 1 million refugees are currently living in Lebanon—a country of only 4.5 million. Ethiopia hosts roughly 400 refugees per every dollar of GDP—the highest such burden on the planet. The strain on these countries is enormous, as is the risk to global security.

Second, failing to address the migrant crisis will fuel transnational crime. Not because refugees themselves are any less law-abiding, but because desperate refugees are turning to smuggling operations, many of which are run by criminal gangs. Along with transporting refugees, these organizations engage in drug trafficking, human trafficking, including trafficking of children, arms trafficking, and other illicit activity. EUROPOL estimates criminal networks involved in migrant smuggling to and within the EU grew significantly in 2015, and were estimated to have had a turnover of between 3 and 6 billion Euros. If we allow this crisis to fester, we push some of the world's most desperate people into the arms of some of the world's most unscrupulous people, padding criminals' bank accounts and funding activities that threaten our security.

Third, addressing the refugee crisis is another way to undermine the forces of violent extremism that can take hold at home and abroad—because when we support and care for refugees, we contradict their message. Groups like ISIL and al Qaeda insist that the West is at war with Islam. It's a core element of their twisted narrative. And, like other communities with no access to opportunity and no hope, disaffected refugees may find themselves targeted by these messages. Furthermore, the data shows that homegrown terrorism poses a bigger threat to the United States than radicalized refugees—and diaspora communities can be our best defense and early warning system. So when we deliver aid to areas in the Muslim world affected by conflict and civil strife, that helps chip away at ISIL's lies. And when refugees from Syria and Iraq are welcomed warmly in Detroit and Dallas, or in Boise and Salt Lake City, and quickly become part of the fabric of American life, we strengthen the communities who are best positioned to help us combat violent extremism here at home.

People worry, though, that terrorists will come into the country through our refugee program. At a town hall in Indiana a few weeks ago, a veteran asked President Obama how we could guarantee that none of the refugees we're taking in have been radicalized. And, of course, no system is fool-proof. But refugees are subject to the highest level of scrutiny of any traveler to the United States. If someone is seeking to harm us, coming as a refugee is perhaps the most difficult way to get in.

As the President and others have repeatedly emphasized, the United States' Refugee Admissions Program entails comprehensive and rigorous vetting. Refugees are screened against multiple U.S. government databases—the National Counterterrorism Center, the

FBI, the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Defense, the Department of State—which include information provided by our global partners. Their fingerprints are assessed to rule out any matches to criminal or terrorism records. They are interviewed, often multiple times, before finally being allowed to set foot in the United States. Syrian refugees go through additional screening, and the entire process generally takes over a year. And we are always working to improve the process. But President Obama is right when he says that, “Our nations can welcome refugees who are desperately seeking safety and ensure our own security. We can and must do both.”

Moreover, as everyone here is well aware, refugees strengthen and enrich our nation in countless ways. In some cases, they strengthen us quite literally, as brave men and women wearing the uniform of our armed forces. But refugees also contribute as doctors, teachers, lawyers, and engineers. Whether it’s Albert Einstein or Madeleine Albright, Marc Chagall or former Intel CEO Andy Grove—or millions of unheralded but indispensable members of our society—refugees come here determined to apply their talents and build a better future for themselves and their families. In fact, a higher share of foreign-born individuals join the labor force than native-born people—and their unemployment rate is typically lower as well. Moreover, from New York to Miami to Kansas City, refugees enrich this nation culturally through their cuisine, dance, literature and language. And throughout American history, that diversity has always been a source of strength.

For all these reasons—and because doing so is consistent with our values and our humanity—we’re working hard to respond constructively and comprehensively to the global migrant crisis. What became clear last year was that neither host countries nor the international humanitarian architecture were fully prepared to address global migration and displacement on this scale. And because we anticipate high levels of displacement for at least the next decade if not longer, we are focused not only on the short term crisis but also the long-term challenge. Our objective is to make sure that the policies and systems are in place to allow the United States, our partners, and our allies to manage the global displacement we face; to alleviate the associated human suffering; and to ensure that criminal actors do not exploit this trend to extend the reach of transnational organized crime and terrorist elements.

We have focused on six lines of effort: first, addressing conditions in countries of first asylum. Second, driving systemic and institutional change in the humanitarian architecture. Third, increasing access to safe, legal, channels for resettlement. Fourth, constraining unsafe, predatory human smuggling networks. Fifth, mobilizing public and private sector assistance and other support. And sixth, reducing the drivers of original flight, such as the civil war in Syria.

First, the United States continues to step up as the world’s largest provider of humanitarian aid. Since the Syrian civil war broke out, we’ve provided over \$5.1 billion to support the victims of that conflict. In just the past six months, more than 80 convoys have delivered aid to struggling Syrians—bringing food and medicine to more than 750,000 people. We’re providing development assistance and working with partners in

frontline countries to expand access to education and employment, and strengthen the resilience of host communities. We are taking similar action in other regions of the world affected by refugee displacement.

Second, and at the same time, we are preparing for tomorrow's crisis. As we discussed at the first-ever World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul last month, we can and must do more to align humanitarian needs with our long-term development work. Instead of waiting for the next drought to send people from their homes, how can we build resilience into our approach? Instead of allowing ethnic or religious tensions to explode into violence, how can we reduce them earlier? The United States has signed on to a Grand Bargain—a major statement in which donors commit to more effective humanitarian responses, and humanitarian providers commit to more clearly prioritizing and managing these needs. This is a promising start, as we seek to anticipate and head off these problems before they become full-blown crises.

Third, we're also working to increase access to safe, lawful resettlement channels—including stepping up our own resettlement efforts. President Obama has committed to admitting at least 10,000 Syrian refugees and 85,000 refugees overall this fiscal year. We will meet these goals. To do so, we've deployed additional State and Homeland Security staff in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt. We're speeding up the admissions process, without skipping any steps. So far, we've admitted about 3,500 Syrian refugees—more in the last five weeks than in the past 7 months. Our overall refugee admissions this year are almost 45,000, and growing. That's in addition to the tens of thousands of refugees admitted and families granted asylum in the United States each year. But we know there's more to be done, and we continue to look to Human Rights First and others to hold our feet to the fire.

Fourth, the United States is working with our partners in Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America to dismantle smuggling networks that seek to profit from the misery of migrants and refugees. We have increased our staffing at EUROPOL to facilitate information sharing and investigations, and are currently adding analysts and investigators to disrupt criminal networks in Central America. Beyond traditional enforcement activity, we have prioritized capacity building and training efforts in Latin America as well as Eastern and Southern Europe, focusing on the protection of human rights of smuggled migrants while bolstering local law enforcement capacity to investigate, arrest, and prosecute criminal networks.

Fifth, we continue to partner with and encourage the public sector as well as the private sector to address a range of refugee needs. And we're seeing a truly impressive—and innovative—response. Google has donated 25,000 Chromebooks to German nonprofits that are educating refugee children, while Pearson is supporting several education centers in Amman. LinkedIn has launched a pilot program to connect Syrian refugees to job opportunities. And thirty percent of the workers at Chobani's Idaho yogurt plant are refugees. This is having a real impact.

Lastly, we seek to reduce the drivers of refugee flight. Syria has been the most prominent challenge in the global refugee crisis, and the most effective way to slow the flow of refugees is to end the civil war. The President has been very clear that the only solution to the Syrian conflict is a political solution. And Secretary Kerry and our international partners are working tirelessly to build on the cessation of hostilities and achieve a lasting resolution to this wrenching conflict.

We'll be bringing many of these lines of effort together in September, when President Obama hosts a Refugee Summit at the UN General Assembly. Our goal is to galvanize the globe to act in three main ways.

We want a broader and deeper commitment to funding UN humanitarian organizations and appeals. We're looking to increase financing for these appeals by at least 30 percent, so that we can help close the significant gap between what countries are providing and what refugees desperately need.

We want to double the number of refugee resettlement slots available worldwide, so that the most vulnerable individuals and families have a legal and orderly way to seek a durable solution to their plight. And so they don't resort to smuggling networks or risk their lives in creaky dinghies on treacherous waters.

We want the countries that are hosting the biggest refugee populations to help those populations help themselves. Many of these refugees will remain in their host countries for years, and it's critical that they're able to take advantage of work and educational opportunities. Our hope is to see a million more refugee kids in school, and a million more refugee adults with work permits. And we are prepared to help these countries advance these tough policy changes. This Summit could go a long way towards achieving these goals and tackling this crisis.

As the President has said, "Refugee crises reveal what is worst and best about us." And despite some of the ugly rhetoric, we really are seeing the best of America. The President has received dozens of letters from people volunteering to open up their homes to refugees. One little boy—a first grader—sent all his savings in an envelope asking that it go to help Syrian refugees.

A few months ago, Tony Blinken, Deputy Secretary of State and my predecessor in this job, told me about visiting refugees and resettlement staff in Oakland, California. He met two young brothers from Afghanistan, who had fled from the Taliban and come to the United States by way of Russia. These young men, Kamal and Jamal, were Muslim. They were in the offices of the Catholic Charities of the East Bay. And they had been resettled by Jewish Family Services, who helped them find an apartment and get them on their feet. Both brothers now speak fluent English and work at Chipotle. The younger one told Tony, "Finally, here I can feel safe."

That's what's best in us. We have the ability to give more refugees that opportunity. We can help more people feel safe. And when we give refugees that security, we are also strengthening our own security—now and for the future.

So, I hope everyone in this room continues working to get out the truth about how critical this issue is, so that our discussions about addressing this crisis are grounded in facts, not fear. Help us underscore that the very extremism people are concerned with is actually mitigated when we greet refugees with open arms. Keep speaking out on behalf of those who have lost everything. Resolving a challenge of this magnitude won't be easy. But, as Ahmad's father said to him—there is nothing you cannot do. With his strength and courage as an example, surely we can build together the architecture necessary to address this problem.

Thank you very much—for your work and your voice in this effort.