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Mission to Iraq, Israel, and the West Bank

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BUREAU OF POPULATION, REFUGEES, AND MIGRATION
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Dear Friends and Colleagues:

I want to report to you on my trip to Iraq, Israel, and the West Bank, between May 5 and May 12. I apologize for the time lag between my trip and this note, though the delay has enabled me to incorporate some recent developments.

In Iraq and the neighboring countries, the United States is deeply engaged in a broad range of efforts to support displaced Iraqis, and to help promote conditions for voluntary return and reintegration of Iraqi refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). We are also increasing support for the local integration of IDPs where that solution is most appropriate. In 2010, the U.S. government provided \$310 million in humanitarian assistance for Iraqi refugees, IDPs and conflict victims and in 2011 we intend to maintain a similar level.

During my visit, I met with senior Iraqi government officials, representatives of UN agencies and NGOs, as well as with IDPs. I also traveled with our Ambassador, James Jeffrey, to Diyala province to visit with Iraqis who have returned to the province and to see their new homes -- many of which were built by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) with the support of the U.S. government. In addition, I visited the Um Al Banee IDP settlement in Baghdad, where the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is providing assistance to 112 families who are living in very difficult conditions on government land, without easy access to water and sanitation, or to employment.

In my meetings, I emphasized three key points: the importance of making local integration a viable option for IDPs who cannot return to their areas of origin; the need for increased Iraqi government engagement with and support for return of its citizens who are living as refugees in the region; and the positive impact that appointing a National Coordinator on Refugees and IDPs within the Iraqi government could have in mobilizing relevant ministries and resources to address the diverse needs of Iraq's displaced. Iraqi officials acknowledged that support for the displaced is an investment in Iraq's long term stability and development, and the Ministry of Migration and Displacement has developed a draft national strategy on displacement which envisions support for local integration. But much more needs to be done on the three priorities outlined above. As I confirmed to my interlocutors, the U.S. government remains committed to sustained engagement on the issue, and we look forward to working with the Government and people of Iraq on initiatives to support displaced citizens and facilitate their reintegration into stable local communities. All Iraqis benefit from the contributions that the formerly displaced make to their country as they seek to rebuild and prosper once again.

In Israel, I sought to learn more about the policy challenges surrounding irregular African migration through the Sinai to Israel, and to promote U.S.-Israeli dialogue and cooperation on migration issues. Israel is now host to over 35,000 African migrants and asylum seekers, a large majority of whom are from Eritrea and Sudan. I met with UNHCR and several NGOs, including Physicians for Human Rights and Hotline for Migrant Workers, to learn more about their work to assist African asylum seekers. I also visited a shelter for trafficking victims and other vulnerable groups run by the African Refugee Development Center, where I learned firsthand of the awful abuses women and children face in the Sinai.

Clearly, Israel faces a substantial challenge involving protection of vulnerable persons, migration management, border security, and law enforcement. Officials with whom I met recognized the multifaceted nature of the challenge. For example, even as the government considers measures to tighten border security, it continues to provide refuge to tens of thousands who cannot return to their countries of origin.

The issue, of course, is regional in dimension, involving source, transit and destination countries. The so-called push factors have been significant, from persecution and human rights abuses in Eritrea, to civil conflict in Sudan, to dire poverty elsewhere in the region. In Egypt, migrants crossing the Sinai face dangerous and inhumane treatment at the hands of smugglers. Held there for ransom, some migrants are raped, tortured, and even killed.

I have worked on human rights and humanitarian issues in the U.S. government, in the NGO community and at the United Nations for more than 25 years. But I have rarely if ever heard about abuses as dreadful as those perpetrated against

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migrants by these smugglers.

Intervention by the Egyptian government is key to stopping these smuggling networks and ending gross abuses. I and other senior U.S. officials have engaged the Egyptian government on these critical issues, and we must sustain and strengthen efforts to encourage stronger action by Egypt -- as well as offer appropriate assistance.

While acknowledging that the Egyptians clearly need to do more, I strongly encouraged the Israeli government to continue to work toward a comprehensive and transparent refugee status determination process for those asylum seekers in Israel who would otherwise be subject to long-term detention or return to a country where they might face persecution. I also expressed concern about the summary return from Israel to Egypt of some asylum-seekers, as credible reports have suggested that such persons have been at risk of abuse in Egyptian custody and recapture by smugglers. And I encouraged greater efforts to identify and address the needs of vulnerable populations, including health and psychosocial services for those victimized in the Sinai. There are a number of active and effective Israeli NGOs that could play a valuable role in assisting the government to identify and address such needs. We are also exploring ways the United States government can continue and strengthen technical assistance to the Israelis to increase their capacity to handle this complex migration flow.

In the West Bank, my focus was on the humanitarian assistance efforts of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The United States is the largest bilateral contributor to UNRWA, and PRM manages the U.S. government's institutional relationship with the organization. I visited Aida refugee camp and Al Walaja village, where I met with refugees who shared their experiences of living in the West Bank and expressed their hopes for a brighter future. In meetings with Israeli government officials, I discussed issues of humanitarian access that affect Palestinian communities in the West Bank. I was encouraged that my Israeli counterparts expressed a willingness to consider how they might minimize negative humanitarian impacts of security measures on the West Bank, such as by exploring ways to limit obstacles to regular access by Palestinian refugees to agricultural lands and employment. During my trip, I was also encouraged by progress on the delivery of humanitarian supplies to Gaza, but emphasized that more needs to be done. In this respect, I was pleased that the Government of Israel last month approved the building of 1,200 new homes and 18 new schools in Gaza, as well as additional UN construction projects. Continued work by UNRWA to build schools and homes for Palestinian refugees in Gaza will go a long way toward improving their living conditions and, importantly, provide refugee youth -- the future of Gaza -- with an education that emphasizes universal values of tolerance and respect for human rights.

In the weeks, months and years to come, the United States will continue to respond to humanitarian assistance requirements in the Middle East and promote international protection objectives -- whether they arise in Iraq, Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, or elsewhere in the region.

Many thanks, and kind regards.

Sincerely,
Eric Schwartz
Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees, and Migration

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