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Ellen Sauerbrey speaks about the “U.S. Response to Refugees Worldwide”

State Department Series Event
Washington, DC; June 20, 2007

Assistant Secretary of State for Population, Refugees and Migration Ellen Sauerbrey addressed the Women's Foreign Policy Group about “The U.S. Response to Refugees Worldwide” on the occasion of World Refugee Day. This event was the second program in the State Department Series that took place June 20th 2007.

Mrs. Sauerbrey began by explaining that the State Department dispenses more than one billion dollars in aid to refugees worldwide, and that more than half of the refugees that are resettled each year come to the U.S. She praised the generosity of Americans, and noted that the U.S. was assisting refugees around the world from Darfur and Iraq to North Korea, Bhutan, Burma, Chad, the Congo, the Central African Republic, and Somalia. However, despite the willingness of Americans to help, aiding refugees is often complicated both by the scale of such crises and also because of the issue of sovereignty which makes providing international help difficult.

According to Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey, one ray of hope is in Darfur. There are more than 230,000 Sudanese refugees in Chad who have fled ethnic cleansing in Darfur, along with 140,000 refugees from Chad itself. The U.S. funds more than 80% of the aid organizations keeping these refugees from starving, and the U.S. efforts have helped 154,000 refugees return home. Creating an environment in which refugees can return home is the main priority of the State Department not just in Darfur but in all refugee situations.

Mrs. Sauerbrey recently traveled to Iraq to see what can be done to help the more than 4 million refugees who have fled Iraq until they are able to return home. The State Department's approach to aiding these refugees has been to focus on bolstering the social services of Jordan and Syria, which are currently hosting the majority of the Iraqi refugees. The Assistant Secretary addressed the concerns about the limited number of Iraqis who have been allowed to resettle in the U.S., explaining that although the America has a moral responsibility to help the Iraqis, each refugee must be cleared by the Department of Homeland Security before being allowed to enter the U.S. The good news is that 1,000 Iraqis will have been resettled in the U.S. before the end of the year, and the State Department has accelerated the process of clearing those refugees who are targets of violence because of their work with organizations such as NGO's, the U.S. Government, or the press.

During her visit to the Middle East, Mrs. Sauerbrey, a former school teacher, said she was most upset by seeing refugee children out of school, calling the situation a looming disaster for the future of Iraq. Therefore, the State Department is funding a program to send 100,000 Iraqi children back to school. The need for such programs around the world is great, however the vast majority of the State Department's budget goes to maintaining basic security and not to social programs such as education. In order to address this need, Assistant Secretary Sauerbrey announced the creation of the International Fund for Refugee Women and Children. The money from the fund will go not only to education but also to skills training and to programs to prevent gender-based violence.