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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6225

March 8, 2022

The Honorable Antony J. Blinken
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20520

RECEIVED

By ESEC at 9:04 am, Mar 09, 2022

The Honorable Alejandro Mayorkas
Secretary of Homeland Security
U.S. Department of Homeland Security
245 Murray Lane, S.W.
Washington, D.C. 20528

Dear Secretary Blinken and Secretary Mayorkas,

The recent shooting death of a Venezuelan infant at the hands of Trinidad and Tobago Coast Guard officers is a stark reminder of the tragic nature of Venezuela's ongoing crisis and the urgent need for the international community to treat the refugee situation with the seriousness it requires.

Given the growing humanitarian needs in our hemisphere, I write to urge your respective agencies to increase efforts to resettle refugees from countries in the Americas. We must ensure that the region's most vulnerable people – like the Venezuelan infant who perished in his mother's arms – can safely access international protection. Resettlement is an important humanitarian tool and one that can incentivize refugees to avoid dangerous irregular secondary or tertiary movements, thereby alleviating pressures on the U.S. southwest border. Increasing resettlement can also demonstrate the United States' earnest commitment to sharing the responsibility for addressing the hemisphere-wide refugee and migration crisis.

Over the past five years, the United States has resettled fewer than 5,000 refugees from Latin America and the Caribbean, despite the region hosting at least 18.4 million refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced, and stateless people. In calendar year 2021, UNHCR estimated that 30,000 people in the Western Hemisphere would be in need of resettlement, yet that same year the United States resettled just 452 refugees from the region.

Venezuela is the source of the world's second largest refugee crisis, and the largest in the Western Hemisphere. A 2019 guidance note issued by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees recognized that the magnitude of the Venezuelan crisis was such that asylum systems could be overwhelmed. The agency encouraged group-based refugee recognitions of Venezuelans. Countries in the region have opened their doors to upwards of five million Venezuelans, but many still lack legal status and face challenges in accessing employment, education, and healthcare. COVID-19-related economic pressures, deepening poverty, and rising

xenophobia have exacerbated the challenges, resulting in increased secondary and tertiary movements of refugees throughout the region. Record numbers of Venezuelans are attempting irregular entry into the United States. Yet **the United States has resettled 26 Venezuelan refugees over the last ten years, including just six under the Biden administration.**

Violence, targeted persecution, and the erosion of democracy and rule of law continue to force the displacement of record numbers of Cubans, Haitians, Nicaraguans, Mexicans, and other populations. The implementation of programs like the so-called Migrant Protection Protocols or the Title 42 public health order effectively curb these populations' legal ability to seek asylum in the United States. Extremely low levels of refugee resettlement from the region also limit legal migration pathways and access to protection, driving vulnerable refugees into the hands of smugglers.

I therefore request that the Biden Administration instruct international humanitarian partners to identify individuals in need of resettlement from the hemisphere, and to increase referrals and transfers to the United States.

I thank you in advance for your work on this important issue.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Robert Menendez". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, stylized "R" and "M".

Robert Menendez
Chairman



U.S. Citizenship
and Immigration
Services

April 19, 2022

The Honorable Robert Menendez
Chairman
Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Chairman Menendez:

Thank you for your March 8, 2022 letter requesting increased efforts to resettle refugees from Venezuela. Like you, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) is committed to strengthening the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) to help address the growing humanitarian needs in our hemisphere and around the globe. Secretary Mayorkas asked that I respond on his behalf.

In the first days of this Administration, President Biden issued executive orders to restore faith in our nation's legal immigration system and to improve our ability to welcome and resettle refugees.¹ DHS and U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) are working together with our federal, state, and local partners to carry out these executive orders and rebuild the USRAP. During the past year, USCIS deployed refugee officers to twelve overseas locations and mitigated the impact of COVID-19 travel restrictions by expanding capacity to conduct refugee interviews remotely using video-teleconferencing. Officers were able to interview over 9,000 individuals in total across twenty-three countries. Other initiatives to provide protection have included completing approximately 39,000 affirmative asylum cases last year, and welcoming more than 80,000 Afghan nationals through Operation Allies Welcome, providing them with support and assistance as they begin their new lives in the United States. Additionally, DHS designated or extended Temporary Protected Status for individuals in need of protection from fourteen countries, including Venezuela and four other countries in the Western Hemisphere (El Salvador, Haiti, Honduras, and Nicaragua). Deferred Enforced Departure also remains in place for individuals from three countries, including Venezuela.

Refugee processing activities were very limited throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, but USCIS recently resumed refugee processing activities in Latin America. In Fiscal Year 2022, as of March 15, 2022, USCIS interviewed approximately 230 Venezuelan refugee applicants and 1,950 Salvadoran, Guatemalan, and Honduran applicants. The Central American Minors

¹ E.O. 14012 of Feb 2, 2021, and E.O. 14013 of Feb 4, 2021, respectively.

Refugee and Parole Program provides certain qualified children who are nationals of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, as well as certain family members of those children, an opportunity to apply for refugee status and possible resettlement in the United States. The Protection Transfer Arrangement among the Government of Costa Rica, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, and the International Organization for Migration provides vulnerable applicants from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras access to the USRAP.

DHS is proud of the role we play to ensure vulnerable individuals seeking humanitarian protection will continue to find a safe haven in the United States. We celebrate the significant contributions that generations of refugees and their families have made to our country.

Thank you again for your letter highlighting the importance of Western Hemisphere refugee application processing and of Venezuelan refugee resettlement. Should you require any additional assistance, please have your staff contact the USCIS Office of Legislative Affairs at (240) 721-3801.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ur M. Jaddou", followed by a long horizontal flourish.

Ur M. Jaddou
Director