

**Congress of the United States**  
**Washington, DC 20515**

August 12, 2010

The Honorable Robert M. Gates  
Secretary of Defense  
1000 Defense Pentagon  
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Dear Mr. Secretary:

We write to bring to your attention the plight of our Iraqi allies, those Iraqis who have worked alongside our troops and diplomats as interpreters and in other capacities since 2003, and who are now threatened for their service. We urge you to work with the Department of State and other federal agencies to develop contingency plans to protect these allies as our forces redeploy.

Since 2003, tens of thousands of Iraqis have worked, or continue to work for, the Department of Defense, the Department of State, U.S. government contractors and other U.S. government funded entities in Iraq. Al Qaeda in Iraq and other terrorist groups affiliated with the Islamic State of Iraq have labeled these Iraqis traitors, collaborators and worse. Many have already paid the ultimate price for their service, and many more may be at risk after U.S. troops depart Iraq.

Resettlement to the United States could be the only safe option for thousands of our Iraqi employees. We commend the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security for expanding and accelerating the admission process for Iraqi refugees during the past three years. However, we are advised that the application process for Iraqi refugees currently takes a year or more on average, and that fewer than 5,000 of those resettled to date were employed by the United States in Iraq. This process will not work quickly enough when U.S.-affiliated Iraqis need it the most urgently.

A second path to resettlement, Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs), has also underperformed the current need. As you know, the National Defense Authorization Act of 2008 expanded the availability of Special Immigrant Visas (SIVs) to enable U.S.-affiliated Iraqis to resettle to the United States, providing 5,000 visas per fiscal year for principal applicants with a carryover of unused availability to succeeding years. However, out of a current availability of 15,000 SIVs, only 2,145 have been issued to principal applicants to date.

Finally, we should consider an airlift, for later processing, out of Iraq for those Iraqis who worked for or on behalf of the United States, who wish to leave Iraq, and who cannot be processed before all U.S. troops depart. The British did exactly this as they departed Basra and militant thugs openly hunted Iraqis who had worked for the British, airlifting their surviving Iraqi employees directly to a Royal Air Force base in England. Each of America's principal coalition partners – Britain, Denmark, and Poland – has honored its moral obligation to endangered Iraqi employees through airlifts to military bases.

There is precedent for a similar undertaking by the United States in Iraq. In the 1996 Operation Pacific Haven, the United States airlifted more than 6,000 Iraqis to Guam in a matter of weeks, where they were safely processed for resettlement to the United States. While the circumstances are somewhat different, our country also used Guam as a processing center for tens of thousands of Vietnamese refugees in 1975.

Mr. Secretary, time is of the essence in developing a plan to address this looming crisis as the August 31, 2010 withdrawal date rapidly approaches. The United States has a moral obligation to stand by those Iraqis who have risked their lives – and the lives of their families – to stand by us in Iraq for the past seven years, and doing so is also in our strategic self-interest. Providing support for our Iraqi allies will advance U.S. national security interests around the world, particularly in Afghanistan, by sending a message that foreign nationals who support our work abroad can expect some measure of protection.

Sincerely,



Benjamin L. Cardin, U.S.S.  
Chairman  
U.S. Helsinki Commission



Alcee L. Hastings, M.C.  
Co-Chairman  
U.S. Helsinki Commission



Richard J. Durbin, U.S.S.  
Assistant Majority Leader  
United States Senate



Ike Skelton, M.C.  
Chairman  
Committee on Armed Services



Richard G. Lugar, U.S.S.  
Ranking Member  
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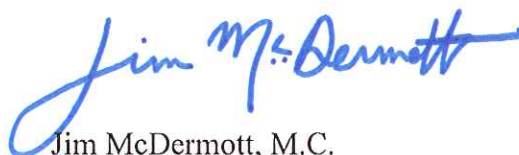


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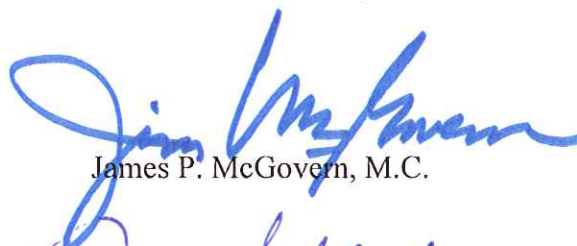
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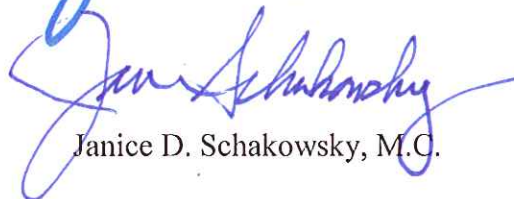
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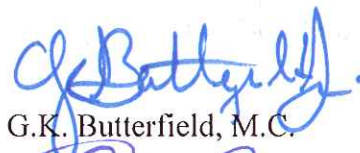
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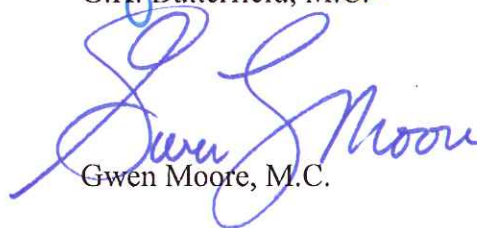
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