



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Wednesday, February 3, 2010

## Congressional Leaders Urge UN Refugee Agency to Address Reports of "On-Going Human Rights Failures" in Polisario-Run Camps in Algeria

Letter from Bipartisan Refugee Caucus Co-chairs follows meetings with Congress and visits to region by *LOST*'s Jeff Fahey, USCRI's Lavinia Limon, and former US Amb. Michael Ussery

**Washington, DC (February 3)** — Last week, US House of Representatives Refugee Caucus Co-Chairs Reps. Zoe Lofgren (D-CA) and Lincoln Diaz-Balart (R-FL) called on the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to "actively work" to protect Sahrawi refugees in Polisario-controlled camps near Tindouf in southern Algeria and expressed concern over a recent report by the US Committee for Refugees and Immigrants (USCRI) that describes three-decades of "ongoing human rights and resettlement failures."

In a letter sent to UN High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres—who in 2009 became the first UNHCR High Commissioner to visit the camps in more than thirty years—the Members of Congress expressed serious concern over accounts in the USCRI report of "dire living conditions in the camps" and "human rights abuses" suffered by tens of thousands of refugees at the hands of the Polisario.

"It is critical that UNHCR take a strong position on behalf of refugees," wrote Reps. Diaz-Balart and Lofgren. "[B]efore yet another generation of refugees is born in these camps, we respectfully request that you actively work with the UN Security Council and other interested States to establish a credible system to protect the population of these camps who have reportedly suffered far too much already."

The Members of Congress expressed concern over human rights abuses and resettlement failures described in the report such as denial of freedom of movement, the right to be repatriated to a country that will accept them, and the alleged diversion of international humanitarian aid. The letter's authors wrote that "establishing an accurate count of the number of refugees living in the Polisario-controlled camps is required to ensure the security of the refugees and to adequately assess whether foreign aid is meeting the needs of the people."

**A copy of the letter can be downloaded from**

<http://www.moroccanamericanpolicy.org/refugee/RefugeeCaucusUNHCRltr012810.pdf>

"The Co-chairs of the House Refugee Caucus have sent a strong message to the UNHCR that this horrible humanitarian crisis has gone on for too long and are concerned that it may be worsening," said former U.S. Ambassador to Morocco Michael Ussery during an interview with the Moroccan American Center for Policy in Washington, DC. "By increasing international pressure and attention on the plight of these refugees, we can end their suffering—which is not only what they deserve, but is also their right guaranteed by international law."

On October 27, Ussery, joined *LOST* cast-member and international advocate Jeff Fahey, and USCRI president Lavinia Limon in meetings on Capitol Hill where they urged Congress to help end the suffering of the refugees in the Tindouf camps. They also recently travelled to the Western Sahara and conducted interviews with refugees who escaped from the Polisario-controlled camps in southern Algeria, and are continuing their campaign to call attention to the plight of warehoused refugees around the world.

**For more information:**

In October 2009, USCRI published "*Stonewalling on Refugee Rights: Algeria and the Sahrawi*", a detailed report—cited in the Congressional letter to UNHCR—outlining findings and recommendations based on interviews with current and former Sahrawi refugees. [<http://www.refugees.org/article.aspx?id=2398>]

In September 2009, the Inter-University Center for Legal Studies and the Moroccan American Center for Policy published "*Group Rights and International Law: A Case study on the Sahrawi Refugees in Algeria*" [<http://www.moroccanamericanpolicy.org/refugee/report.pdf>], an in-depth look at the long history of human rights abuses in the Polisario-controlled camps in Algeria and lack of attention to the refugee plight by the UNHCR.

###

**The Moroccan American Center for Policy (MACP)** is a non-profit organization whose principal mission is to inform opinion makers, government officials and interested publics in the United States about political and social developments in Morocco and the role being played by the Kingdom of Morocco in broader strategic developments in North Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. For more, please visit [www.moroccanamericanpolicy.org](http://www.moroccanamericanpolicy.org)

*This material is distributed by the Moroccan American Center for Policy on behalf of the Government of Morocco. Additional information is available at the Department of Justice in Washington, DC.*