

Closing Statement

by

Congressman Joe Moakley

Mr. Speaker, America has long stood proud as a beacon of freedom for oppressed peoples throughout the world. However, there have been dark times in our own recent history when we have turned our backs on those in need of safe haven. The enactment of this legislation today will help us regain our traditions and strengthen our leadership for freedom and democracy in the eyes of the international community.

Many Members of this body, like me, have met with men, women and children who have been victims of repression and civil war -- individuals who have suffered serious injury, lost family and friends, or escaped from violence. Most of these people are the innocent. They need and deserve the modest protection which HR 45 would accord them.

They don't ask for much. This is the least we can do.

To the opponents of this bill, I ask you to reconsider your position. Let me be clear that my intent is humanitarian and practical -- not political or partisan. We have occasionally had our differences on U.S. foreign policies toward Central America. But let us put those aside in the name of the national interest.

The people this bill would cover are mainly common people. They are citizens of China or Nicaragua or El Salvador who seek the generosity of our country. They hold many political views -- as do our people. They share a need for temporary protection. There is no partisan objective in responding to their appeal.

To those of you who argue that this bill will simply create illegal or uncontrolled migration -- I say you've got your facts backwards. It is war and oppression which create exiles and refugees -- not this bill. And I hope that we can work together to help resolve the root causes of flight.

This bill recognizes the current reality that perhaps 750,000 exiles are already here in the United States. Many are underground. Very few have benefitted from political asylum -- which has not been fairly administered. Most are afraid that they will be forcibly returned to the hostilities in their homeland.

I believe it is in our national self interest to bring these refugees out of the shadows and to give them an opportunity to remain

temporarily -- as well as a reason to present themselves to the appropriate authorities. Enactment of HR 45 will help us regulate and control the presence of these people.

Our current policies have failed --it's time for a change.

We've spent 30 million dollars on detention facilities to imprison Central Americans whose only crime has been to seek political asylum. This policy has solved nothing -- it has only swept this tragic human reality under the rug. These failed policies may sound tough and look tough, but in truth are ineffective and inhumane.

This bill will not be a magnet. It only applies to people here before July 1, 1989. And I'll see to it that everybody understands that fact -- including the governments of the region.

So, we have a choice. We can maintain the status quo by defeating this bill and seek to deport 750,000 refugees. We all know what that will mean: more human suffering; more taxpayer money wasted, less dignity in the eyes of the world, and the shame of future generations. Or we can make the right decision and provide leadership. Enactment of this legislation does honor to our refugee traditions and it establishes our ability to enact wise policies on tough issues.

I have heard it said that if we enact this bill, the people covered will stay here forever. Well, I don't know about all of you, but I have had long conversations with these exiles from China, Nicaragua, and El Salvador. Over the years, I've come to know these people very well. They are patriots; they love their countries; they cherish their heritage; they value their culture; and they believe in democracy. I am certain that many, if not most, dream of the day that they can return to the land where they were born...with the hope of building a better life.

And yes, the U.S. is a great country, and sure, some people who have come here in fear will hope to remain. But I believe a substantial majority will return voluntarily and this bill provides a mechanism to ensure this result.

Mr. Speaker, we are talking about human beings--men, women, and children. This bill is not about cargo; it's not about arms; it's not about foreign policy; it's not about anything except human beings. These are people who need our help and we are in a position to help them. It's about men and women who don't ask for much -- and this bill really doesn't give them much. It's about men and women who simply ask us to do unto them as we would want them to do unto us if our families had been uprooted by war or if our children had watched 3,000 of their fellow students gunned down on a dark night in June.

Mr. Speaker, El Salvador is about the size of Massachusetts. 70,000 civilians have died there in 10 years of war and violence. I know that the people of Massachusetts would be spread throughout New England if my state had endured 10 years of war.

The people of my district, like the people of yours, have great compassion and understanding when they know the facts, and when they see the faces and hear the voices which lie behind the facts.

A vote for this bill is good immigration policy. A vote for this bill is in the humanitarian interests of those it seeks to protect. And a vote for this bill honors our values and our traditions.

Support HR 45.