Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

February 4, 2010

His Excellency Abhisit Vejjajiva
Prime Minister
Kingdom of Thailand
Bangkok
Thailand

Mr. Prime Minister:

The relationship between Thailand and the United States is important for both of our nations. In light of this friendship, we are writing today to share our serious concerns regarding reported plans by Thai officials to force thousands of ethnic Karen refugees back to Burma.

In June 2009, approximately 4,000 refugees fled to Thailand, following a brutal military offensive by the Burmese military regime and its allies, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army (DKBA), on Internally Displaced People (IDP) camps in Karen State, Eastern Burma. Until now, these refugees have remained in temporary shelters in the Nong Bua, Mae U Su, and Mae Salit villages, close to the Thailand-Burma border.

Many of these refugees have already been forced to flee their homes four or more times, due to the ongoing violence carried out by Burma's military regime and unsafe conditions. The area in Karen State to which they would be made to return is home to dangerous landmines and is controlled by the notorious DKBA. On January 18, 2010, a pregnant woman who had returned to the region stepped on a landmine, incurring serious injuries. This serves as a brutal reminder of the conditions the Karen refugees would be forced to endure upon their repatriation.

If forced to return, these refugees will suffer horrific human rights abuses. They will undoubtedly be subject to forced labor, executions, torture and mutilations, forced recruitment as soldiers, including child soldiers, and theft and extortion, making their survival very difficult. In addition, the regime continues to use rape as a weapon of terror. More than half of the refugees facing repatriation are women and children who will live in fear of rape and sexual violence.

Historically, Thailand has developed a reputation as a country that provides refuge to those fleeing serious persecution, but actions like this will undermine and tarnish this reputation. The United States understands the burden placed on Thailand and has helped resettle tens of thousands of Burmese refugees from Thailand over the last 4 years.

We urgently request that you halt the repatriation of refugees back to Burma's conflict zone and continue to offer them protection in Thailand.

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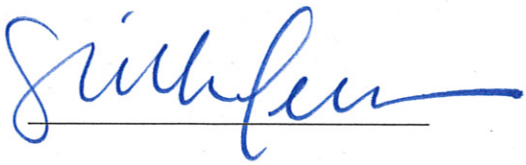
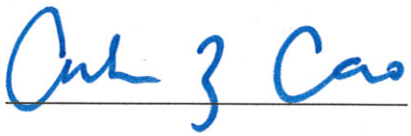
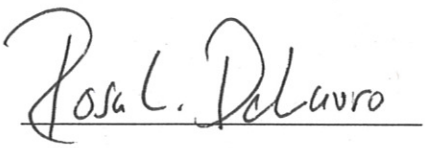
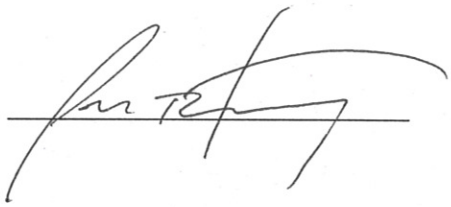
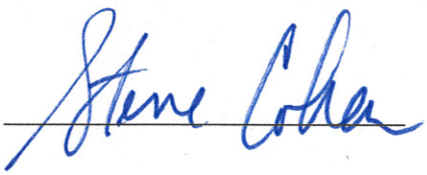
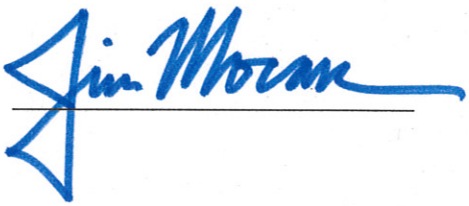
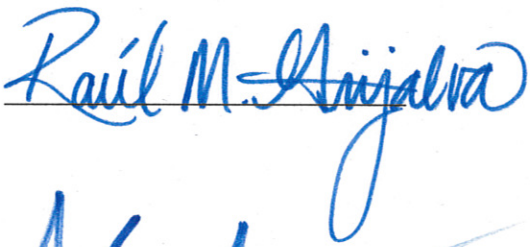
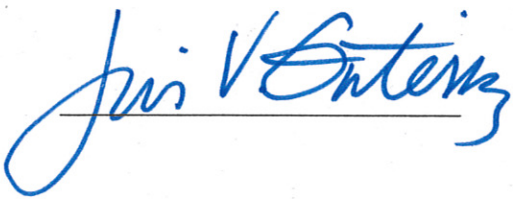
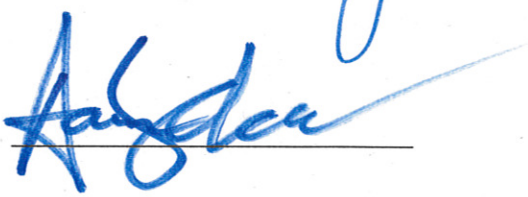
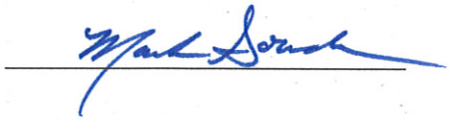
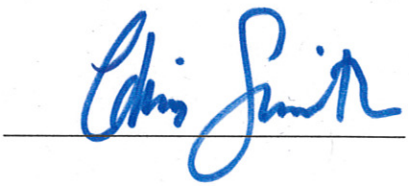
Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,