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August 10, 2020

Via Federal e-Rulemaking Portal

RE: Notice of Proposed Rulemaking Security Bars and Processing; RIN 1615-AC57/ Docket No. USCIS 2020-0013

To Whom It May Concern:

The Harvard Immigration & Refugee Clinical Program ("HIRC") and the HLS Immigration Project ("HIP") submit this comment on the proposed rulemaking published July 10, 2020 by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security ("DHS") and the U.S. Department of Justice ("DOJ") (collectively, the "Agencies"), entitled Security Bars and Processing (the "Proposed Rules"). We recommend that the rulemaking be withdrawn because, *inter alia*, the Proposed Rules (1) violate U.S. nonrefoulement obligations, (2) are contrary to law and arbitrary and capricious in their expansion of bars to asylum and withholding, (3) violate U.S. obligations under the Torture Convention by impermissibly ratcheting up the credible fear screening standard, (4) eliminate due process protections without explanation.

I. Statement of Interest

HIRC is one of the oldest clinical programs in the country that focuses on the advancement of immigrants' rights while teaching students critical lawyering skills. HIRC includes two distinct clinics: (1) the Immigration & Refugee Advocacy Clinic, which represents clients seeking humanitarian protections in a range of different fora, including administrative tribunals and federal appellate courts and (2) the Crimmigration Clinic, which focuses on the growing intersection of criminal law and immigration law. HIRC faculty and staff also teach a range of courses concerning immigration policy, refugees and trauma, the intersection of immigration law and labor law, and the intersection of criminal law and immigration law. HIRC faculty and staff regularly publish scholarship concerning asylum adjudication, due process protections in removal proceedings, working with traumatized refugees, crimmigration, and immigration detention.

HIRC has worked with thousands of immigrants and refugees since its founding in 1984. Its advocacy includes representation of individual applicants for asylum and related relief and the development of theories and policy relating to asylum law, crimmigration, and immigrants' rights. HIRC has an interest in the proper application and development of U.S. immigration and asylum law to ensure that individuals receive fair and proper consideration under U.S. law and treaty obligations.

HIP is a student-practice organization under the supervision of HIRC, which provides law students with the opportunity to gain practical, hands-on legal experience. HIP represents clients seeking release from detention in Massachusetts, promotes policy reform, and provides representation to refugees and asylees who are seeking family reunification and legal residency.

HIRC and HIP regard the Proposed Rules as arbitrary and capricious and contrary to law. If implemented, the Proposed Rules would contravene the protections the United States is required to provide under domestic and international law to individuals who fear return to persecution or torture. As is true of other asylum-related rulemakings promulgated by the Departments in the last year, the Proposed Rules would jeopardize the lives and safety of countless refugees and asylum seekers eligible for protection. We urge DHS and DOJ to withdraw their current proposal immediately.

HIRC and HIP also object to the Proposed Rules' thirty-day timeframe for public comments. This comment period overlaps with that of other unlawful proposed regulations regarding protection eligibility, published June 15,¹ and does not provide the public with sufficient time to engage with the proposed changes. Under 5 U.S.C. §553(c), interested parties must have a good faith opportunity to synthesize information presented in proposed rules and meaningfully participate in rulemaking. The Agencies' publication of myriad unlawful proposed rules that are, as explained below, both overlapping and contradictory frustrates that aim.

II. The Proposed Rules Violate the United States' Non-Refoulement Obligations

The Proposed Rules, if implemented, would exclude from protection bona fide refugees. Specifically, individuals coming from or passing through countries with COVID-19 cases will be barred from asylum and withholding of removal protection—regardless of their well-founded fear of persecution, or even the affirmative likelihood that they will face persecution or torture upon removal.² This categorical bar to protection is of extreme concern and importance to HIRC, whose clients include victims of genocide and torture, political dissidents and advocates for freedom and equality, and women and children who have suffered extreme physical and sexual violence. There is no valid legal basis for the U.S. to abandon its protection obligations to refugees due to COVID-19.

The United States bound itself to the protection imperatives guaranteed by the 1951 Refugee Convention when it acceded to the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees.³ In *INS v. Cardoza-Fonseca*, the Supreme Court recognized that Congress enacted the Refugee Act of 1980 "to bring United State refugee law into conformance with the 1967 Protocol" and therefore the Refugee Convention.⁴ In "enacting the Refugee Act of 1980," which purposefully embraced

1231(b)(3) (statutory withholding of removal protection is mandatory where an applicant is eligible).

¹ 85 Fed. Reg. 36264 (published June 15, 2020).

² See 85 Fed. Reg. 41201, 41208 (published July 9, 2020) ("[T]he Departments are proposing to clarify that they can *categorically* bar from eligibility for asylum, statutory withholding of removal and withholding of removal under the CAT regulations as dangers to the security of the United States aliens who potentially risk bringing in deadly infectious disease to, or facilitating its spread within, the United States.") (emphasis added); *see* 8 U.S.C.

³ See United Nations Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, Jan. 31, 1967, [1968] 19 U.S.T. 6223, T.I.A.S. No. 6577, 606 U.N.T.S. 268.

⁴ INS v. Cardoza-Fonseca, 480 U.S. 421, 436–37 (1987).

the Convention and Protocol's definition of "refugee,"⁵ Congress aimed to "give statutory meaning to our national commitment to human rights and humanitarian concerns."⁶

Under Article 33 of the Refugee Convention, when a person meets the Convention's definition of a refugee, a state party is forbidden from returning the person "in any manner whatsoever to the" country where she fears persecution.⁷ The United States codified this obligation through the Refugee Act's requirement that "the Attorney General *may not remove* an alien to a country . . . [where] the alien's life or freedom would be threatened in that country because of the alien's race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion."⁸ As the Supreme Court has recognized for decades, Congress expected and intended the Refugee Act's non-refoulement protection to be mandatory, not discretionary.⁹ The Refugee Act also created a statutory right to apply for asylum for "*any* alien who is physically present in the United States or who arrives in the United States . . . whether or not at a designated port of arrival . . . irrespective of such alien's status."¹⁰ Even the expedited removal procedures Congress enacted in 1996 contain safeguards to ensure, at least in theory, that there would be "no danger that an [individual] with a genuine asylum claim will be returned to persecution."¹¹ The Proposed Rules' categorical bars violate these treaty and statutory obligations.¹²

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees ("UNHCR") has specifically advised that categorical exclusions, like the one proposed here, "would be discriminatory and would not meet international standards," violating Article 33's non-refoulement requirement.¹³ In order to address health concerns during the pandemic, UNHCR instead urges state parties to adopt measures "proportionate and reasonable to the aim of protecting public health," including but not limited to "screening of travellers on arrival and the use of quarantine for persons who have been

⁵ *Matter of S-P*-, 21 I.&N. Dec. 486, 492 (BIA 1996) (quoting S. Rep. No. 256, 96th Cong., 2d Sess. 1, 4, reprinted in 1980 U.S.C.C.A.N. 141, 144); see also H.R. Rep. No. 96-781, at 1 (1980) (Conf. Rep.) (noting that the Refugee Act aimed to "establish a more uniform basis for the provision of assistance to refugees"); S. Rep. No. 96-590, at 1 (1980) (Conf. Rep.) (same).

⁶ See id.

⁷ United Nations Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, Jan. 31, 1967, [1968] 19 U.S.T. 6223, T.I.A.S. No. 6577, 606 U.N.T.S. 268.

⁸ See 8 U.S.C. § 1231(b)(3) (emphasis added).

⁹ See INS v. Stevic, 467 U.S. 407, 421 n.15 (1984) (explaining that Congress in passing the Refugee Act "substituted mandatory language for what was previously a grant of discretionary authority to the Attorney General to withhold deportation"); see also id. at 429–30 (holding a grant of statutory withholding of removal requires showing "evidence establishing that it is more likely than not that the alien would be subject to persecution on one of the specified ground").

¹⁰ See 8 U.S.C. § 1158(a) (emphasis added).

¹¹ See 8 U.S.C. § 1225(b)(1)(a); see H.R. REP. NO. 104-469, pt. 1, at 158 (1996).

¹² See 8 U.S.C. § 1231(b)(3) "([T]he Attorney General may not remove an alien to a country if the Attorney General decides that the alien's life or freedom would be threatened in that country because of the alien's race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion.").

¹³ See UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Key Legal Considerations on access to territory for persons in need of international protection in the context of the COVID-19 response," (Mar. 16, 2020), *available at:* <u>https://www.refworld.org/docid/5e7132834.html</u>; *See also Grace v. Whitaker*, 344 F. Supp. 3d 96, 124 (D.D.C. 2019) ("In interpreting the Refugee Act in accordance with the meaning intended by the Protocol, the language in

the Act should be read consistently with the United Nations' interpretation of the refugee standards") (*citing Cardoza-Fonseca*, 480 U.S. at 438-39), (*aff'd in part Grace v. Barr*, _F.3d_, 2020 WL 4032652 (D.C. Cir. 2020)). UNHCR provides interpretative guidance regarding states parties' treaty obligations on which federal courts have consistently relied. *See Cardoza-Fonseca*, 480 U.S. at 438-39; *Bringas-Rodriguez v. Sessions*, 850 F.3d 1051, 1060-61 (9th Cir. 2017) (*en banc*).

identified as suffering from the disease or who may have been exposed to the virus."¹⁴ UNHCR counsels that "denial of access to territory *without safeguards to protect against refoulement* cannot be justified on the grounds of any health risk."¹⁵ In keeping with U.S. obligations under domestic and international law, as well as guidance from UNHCR, we thus urge the Agencies to retract the Proposed Rules.

III. The Proposed Rules' expansion of the "danger to the security of the United States" bar is contrary to law and arbitrary and capricious.

The Proposed Rules are both contrary to law and arbitrary and capricious in purporting to "merely clarify" the existing "danger to the security of the United States" bar to asylum and withholding of removal.¹⁶ Contrary to the Agencies' contention, the "danger to the security of the United States" bar does not involve public health concerns. Thus, the Proposed Rules' new categorical bar to asylum unlawfully conflicts with the statutory language in 8 U.S.C. § 1158(a)(1).

First, the Proposed Rule contends that "the 'danger to the security of the United States' bars to eligibility for asylum and withholding of removal apply in the context of public health emergencies."¹⁷ The extension of this bar to include such a sweeping consideration as public health represents an impermissible reading of the statutory text. Indeed, as the Agencies' own cited sources make clear, this understanding contradicts both legislative history and precedent. None of the legislative history cited by the Agencies ever mentions or considers public health in the context of national security. Rather, the relevant history considered national security primarily in relation to terrorism, defining the phrase as including "the national defense and foreign relations of the United States" and possibly national economic interests.¹⁸

Likewise, the Agencies rely heavily on *Matter of A-H-*,¹⁹ which never mentions public health concerns in its detailed explanation of the meaning of the phrase "danger to the security of the United States." Rather, in that decision the Attorney General explained that the phrase "is best understood to mean a risk to the Nation's defense, foreign relations, or economic interests."²⁰ Indeed, there is no mention of public health in either the precedent or the legislative history cited by the Agencies.

The Proposed Rule thus represents a new categorical bar to asylum, not the expansion of any existing one. The Executive's discretion to establish new bars to eligibility is constrained by section 1158(b)(2)(c), which allows only for the creation of new limitations that are "consistent with" the right to seek asylum.²¹ Recently, in *East Bay Sanctuary v. Barr*, the Ninth Circuit made

¹⁴ *Id*.

¹⁵ See id. (emphasis added). The Supreme Court has recognized that UNHCR's treaty interpretations "provide [] significant guidance in construing the Protocol, to which Congress sought to conform." See Cardoza-Fonseca, 480 U.S. at 421, 439 n. 22.

 $^{^{16}} See \ 8 \ U.S.C. \ \$ \ 1158(b)(2)(A)(iv); \ 1231(b)(3)(B)(iv).$

¹⁷ See 81 Fed. Reg. 41201, 41208 (published July 9, 2020).

¹⁸ See *id.* at 41209 (citing 142 Cong. Rec. H2268-03, at H2276 (Mar. 14, 1996) (S. 735, title VI, 401(a)); Section 401(a) of title IV of S. 735 (as passed the Senate on June 7, 1995), 141 Cong. Rec. S7864 (July 7, 1995)).

¹⁹ Matter of A-H-, 23 I&N Dec. 774, 788 (AG 2005)

²⁰ See id.

²¹ See 8 U.S.C. § 1158(b)(2)(C); East Bay Sanctuary Covenant v. Barr, 964 F.3d 832, 849 (9th Cir. 2020) ("[T]he discretion to prescribe criteria for eligibility is constrained by § 1158(b)(2)(C), which allows the Attorney General to 'establish additional limitations and conditions . . . under which an alien shall be ineligible for asylum' only so long as those limitations and conditions are 'consistent with' § 1158.").

clear that the executive branch could not use its discretion to create a new bar to asylum that was not consistent with § 1158.²² So too here.

A new categorical bar based on public health concerns conflicts with the statutory text of section 1158(a)(1). The Proposed Rules would categorically prevent individuals coming from or passing through countries reporting Covid-19 cases—which as of July 20, 2020 include all but a small handful of countries around the world²³—from applying for asylum. The Proposed Rules thus contradict the statute's clear mandate in 8 U.S.C. §1158(a)(1) that "*any* alien who is physically present in the United States or who arrives in the United States . . . may apply for asylum."²⁴ The plain language of the statute demonstrates Congress' clear intent that any individual in the United States or arriving at the U.S. border has the right to seek refuge. The Proposed Rules, on the other hand, would close the door to nearly all asylum seekers from anywhere around the world. As a result, the Proposed Rules contravene the unambiguous statutory language of the INA.

IV. The Proposed Rules' new credible fear standard of proof for protection under the Convention Against Torture is contrary to law.

Under the Proposed Rules, an individual subject to expedited removal may be deported from the United States if, *inter alia*, she "has not affirmatively established during the credible fear process that [she] is more likely than not to face torture in the country of removal."²⁵ In other words, the Proposed Rules would require individuals to establish eligibility for protection under the Convention Against Torture ("CAT") in the truncated and often-flawed credible fear interview ("CFI") process.²⁶ With this ratcheting up of the threshold screening standard, the Proposed Rules all but guarantee that protection-eligible individuals will be summarily returned to persecution, torture, or even death without ever having an opportunity to fully present their claims. Indeed, individuals are presently only required to make such an evidentiary showing in a full removal proceeding.²⁷ This change too is unlawful and arbitrary and capricious.

The CFI is an "initial screening" designed to protect individuals against return to persecution or torture, in accordance with U.S. obligations under domestic and international law.²⁸ Congress thus intended the credible fear interview to involve "a low screening standard for admission into the usual full asylum process,"²⁹ in order to prevent the return to persecution of individuals with "genuine [protection] claim[s]."³⁰ Accordingly, as Justice Alito recently

²² 964 F.3d at 846.

²³See CDC, World Map, https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/global-covid-19/world-map.html (updated July 20, 2020).

²⁴ 8 U.S.C. § 1158(a)(1) (emphasis added).

²⁵ See 85 Fed. Reg. at 41210.

²⁶ See id.

²⁷ See 8 C.F.R. § 208.30(e)(3) ("an alien will be found to have a credible fear of torture if the alien shows that there is a significant possibility that he or she is eligible for withholding of removal or deferral of removal under the Convention Against Torture"); 8 C.F.R. § 208.30(f) ("if an alien . . . is found to have a credible fear of . . . torture, the asylum officer will so inform the alien and issue a Form I–862, Notice to Appear, *for full consideration of the asylum and withholding of removal claim in proceedings under section 240 of the Act.*") (emphasis added). ²⁸ H.R. REP. NO. 104-469, pt. 1, at 158 (1996).

²⁹ See 142 CONG. REC. S11491-02 ("The credible fear standard . . . is intended to be a low screening standard for admission into the usual full asylum process[.]"); *see also Grace v. Barr*, 2020 WL 4032652 at *2 (D.C. Cir. July 17, 2020) (explaining that the statute's screening purposes are "evident in the system's design and are confirmed throughout the legislative history.").

³⁰ H.R. REP. NO. 104-469, pt. 1, at 158 (1996).

explained for the Supreme Court, an immigrant in this "screening interview . . need not show that he or she *is in fact eligible* for" protection,³¹ but only a "significant possibility" he or she will qualify for relief.³² Thus, until its recent rulemaking,³³ DHS applied the "significant possibility" standard when considering an immigrant's eligibility for protection under the CAT. *See* 8 C.F.R. § 208.30(d)(3) ("an alien will be found to have a credible fear of torture if the alien shows that there is a *significant possibility* that he or she is eligible for withholding of removal or deferral of removal under the Convention Against Torture") (emphasis added).

The conditions of the CFI process make it unreasonable to expect immigrants in expedited removal to "affirmatively establish" they are eligible for CAT protection. Asylum seekers in Credible Fear Interviews are detained (sometimes for extended periods)³⁴ where their symptoms of trauma may be exacerbated,³⁵ and where access to competent interpretation services is often completely lacking.³⁶ All of the above may result in erroneous negative credible fear determinations. Furthermore, DHS has reportedly engaged Customs and Border Protection ("CBP") officers, who unlike asylum officers do not receive substantive legal training, to conduct CFIs—a task for which they are altogether unequipped.³⁷

In passing the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998 ("FARRA"), which incorporates U.S. obligations under CAT into U.S. law, Congress mandated that the United States *must* protect *every* immigrant who qualifies for CAT relief.³⁸ There are no exemptions or bars to deferral of removal under CAT. For example, those who have committed any crime specified in 8

³¹ See Dep't of Homeland Security v. Thuraissigiam, 140 S.Ct. 1959, 1965 (2020) (emphasis original).

 $^{^{32}}$ See 8 U.S.C. 1225 (b)(1)(B)(ii) ("[T]]he term "credible fear of persecution" means that there is a significant possibility, taking into account the credibility of the statements made by the alien in support of the alien's claim and such other facts as are known to the officer, that the alien could establish eligibility for asylum under section 1158 of this title."); see also 8 U.S.C. § 1225(b)(1)(A)(i)–(ii), (b)(1)(E); 8 C.F.R. § 208.30(e)(23) (an individual will be found to have a "credible fear" of torture if there is a "significant possibility" she will be eligible for protection under CAT).

³³ Compare 85 Fed. Reg. 41201, 41210 (published July 9, 2020) ("If the alien has not affirmatively established during the credible fear process that the alien is *more likely than not to face torture* in the country of removal, the alien may be expeditiously removed.") (emphasis added) *with* 85 Fed. Reg. 36265, 36268 ("[T]he Departments propose amending 8 C.F.R. § 208.30 and 8 C.F.R. § 1208.30 to raise the standard of proof from a *significant possibility* that the alien is eligible for withholding or deferral of removal under the CAT regulations to a *reasonable possibility* that the alien would be tortured in the country of removal.") (emphasis added).

³⁴ See Human Rights First, *Credible Fear: A Screening Mechanism in Expedited Removal* 3 n. 12 (Feb. 2018) ("35,598 of 42,187 (or 84 percent) of credible fear applicants were detained in ICE custody. Families are often held in U.S. immigration detention for several weeks, and sometimes much longer. Adult asylum seekers are often held in detention facilities and jails for many months.") (citations omitted).

³⁵ See, e.g., Giulia Turrini et al., Common mental disorders in asylum seekers and refugees: umbrella review of prevalence and intervention studies, 11 Int'l J. Of Mental Health Systems 51 (Aug. 25, 2017),

https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5571637/ (finding that at least one out of every three asylum seekers struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and/or anxiety); Megan Brooks, *Refugees have high burden of mental health problems*, Psychiatry and Behavioral Health Learning Network, (June 19, 2019) https://www.psychcongress.com/article/refugees-have-high-burden-mental-health-problems.

³⁶ See, e.g., Rachel Nolan, A Translation Crisis at the Border, THE NEW YORKER (Jan 6. 2020).

³⁷ See Memorandum of Agreement Between U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and U.S. Citizenship & Immigration Services (USCIS) (July 10, 2019), *available at* https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/6798341-Signed-MOA-by-Morgan-INTC-1647-Redactions-Applied.html (providing for CBP officers to begin conducting CFIs).

³⁸See Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998 (FARRA), P.L. 105-277 at § 2242(a) ("It shall be the policy of the United States not to expel, extradite, or otherwise effect the involuntary return of any person to a country in which there are substantial grounds for believing the person would be in danger of being subjected to torture, regardless of whether the person is physically present in the United States.").

U.S.C. §1252(a)(2)(C), are still eligible for protection under CAT.³⁹ The Proposed Rules thus fly in the face of Congress's intent to protect individuals from return to torture and to establish a screening process that ensures that individuals who might qualify for protection have their day in court to prove their claims.

While the above is more than enough reason to withdraw the Proposed Rule, we separately note that the Proposed Rules also contradicts the Agencies' June 15, 2020 Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, which indicates that immigrants in CFIs must demonstrate a "reasonable possibility of torture" for their CAT claim to trigger full review by an immigration judge.⁴⁰ That "reasonable possibility of torture" standard has been previously utilized by DHS in "reasonable fear interviews" for immigrants subject to administrative or reinstated removal, and differs from *both* the statutory "significant possibility" standard DHS has used thus far, *and* the "more-likely-than not" standard the Agencies propose to adopt in this rulemaking.⁴¹ It frustrates the clear purpose of notice-and-comment for the Agencies to promulgate two entirely different standards of proof for the same evidentiary inquiry in two separate rulemakings within a 24-day span.⁴²

V. The Proposed Rules erode due process without acknowledgment, let alone explanation

Finally, HIRC and HIP object to the Agencies' completely unacknowledged and unexplained elimination of a layer of due process for immigrants in credible fear proceedings. Currently, 8 C.F.R. § 1208.30(g)(2)(IV)(a) provides that where an immigration judge "concurs with the determination of [an] asylum officer that the alien does not have a credible fear of persecution or torture . . . [t]he Service . . . may reconsider [the] negative credible fear finding . . . after providing notice of its reconsideration to the immigration judge." The Proposed Rules' revised version of 1208.30(g)(2)(IV)(a) eliminates *sub silentio* the Service's authority to reconsider a negative credible fear determination.⁴³ The Agencies' failure to even acknowledge, let alone explain, such a significant change suggests an alarming lack of thoroughness or analysis in the Agencies' promulgation of the Proposed Rules.⁴⁴

In sum, we urge DHS and DOJ to rescind the proposed rules and instead promote greater compliance with international and domestic legal obligations to provide protection to individuals who fear return to persecution or torture.

We appreciate the opportunity to provide comments on the Proposed Rules. If you have questions, please contact us by phone at 617-384-8165 or by email at hirc@law.harvard.edu.

³⁹ See, e.g., Nasrallah v. Barr, 140 S. Ct. 428 (2019).

⁴⁰ See 85 Fed. Reg. at 36268.

⁴¹ See 8 C.F.R. § 208.31(c) ("The alien shall be determined to have a reasonable fear of . . . torture if the alien establishes a reasonable possibility . . . that he or she would be tortured in the country of removal."); 8 C.F.R . § 208.31(e) ("If an asylum officer determines that an alien described in this section has a reasonable fear of . . . torture, the officer shall so inform the alien and issue a . . . Notice of Referral to the Immigration Judge, for full consideration of the request for withholding of removal . . . ").

⁴² See 5 U.S.C. § 553(c).

⁴³ See 85 Fed. Reg. at 41218.

⁴⁴ See Encino Motorcars, LLC v. Navarro, 136 S. Ct. 2117, 2126 (2016) (an "agency must at least display awareness that it is changing position An unexplained inconsistency in agency policy is a reason for holding an interpretation to be an arbitrary and capricious change") (cleaned up).

Sincerely,

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