Mr. Speaker, there is fierce debate and dissension on

this floor and in Congress and around the country about the war in

Iraq. This disagreement runs deep. It is profound. I believe it to be

sincere. But there is one thing that everybody will agree on regardless

of whether they think this war is merited or not, regardless of whether

they think it has been prosecuted in a reasonable and efficient manner

or not. They can acknowledge the debt and obligation that the United

States has to over 4 million Iraqis who have been forced to flee their

homes. This is a humanitarian crisis that rivals Darfur. It is the

worst ongoing humanitarian crisis in the world at this point.

Over 2 million Iraqis have fled their country. And while there is

debate over the precise numbers these days, whether it is an additional

25,000 a month or 50,000 a month, whether it is going up or going down,

no one disputes that they are still fleeing their homes by the

thousands.

I first became involved with the problem of the Iraqis who are at

risk because they help the United States, guides and translators, when

I started working with a group of high school students in Portland,

Oregon, at Lincoln High School, who were working in turn with some

Oregon National Guard members who had returned to Oregon but were

trying desperately to save the life of a young woman who had served as

their translator. Because she had helped the Americans, she was

targeted. She and her family were targeted by extremists. It took

months. Time doesn't permit going through all the hurdles that we

encountered. Luckily, that young woman is safely in the United States

now going to college and she is no longer at risk, although afraid to

show her face or to be identified specifically for fear that her family

would in turn be targeted. I made a commitment to those young people in

the high school and in the Oregon National Guard that we would work to

introduce comprehensive legislation to make it easier to meet the

obligation to those who took America at its word, who helped our brave

soldiers, and who in turn now have their lives imperiled.

We have introduced comprehensive legislation that would increase the

allowable number that could come, that would put somebody in charge of

this responsibility, make it possible to actually be processed in

country.

It is ironic that we have the largest embassy in the world in

Baghdad, and yet the Iraqis have to leave the country to seek refugee

status. They can't go to the green zone and this vast embassy. They

have to leave the country in order to apply for asylum.

I frankly was encouraged that last week our colleagues in the Senate

made important progress by passing an amendment to the Senate defense

authorization bill that would start to address the crisis by including

some of the elements in the comprehensive legislation that I have

introduced. It is an important first step, but it is only a first step.

It is time for the United States to do the right thing for these people

whose lives are imperiled.

When we started this process at the beginning of the fiscal year, the

United States was going to allow 7,000 people in the country. A small

number, actually, by comparison to what little Sweden, for example, was

willing to do, a country a fraction of our size, and they aren't the

country who engineered this war nor are occupying Iraq. Well, in a few

months that goal of 7,000 was reduced to 2,000. As the fiscal year

ended this last weekend, we fell short even of that reduced goal: Only

1,600 of these Iraqi refugees were brought into this country.

Our failure to step up is having serious operational consequences.

Ambassador Crocker in a memo that has been I suppose leaked but widely

published, widely disseminated here in Washington, DC, points out that

the failure to help these people who are helping us actually undermines

the ability to have other guides and interpreters and people working

with us. We risk leaving a legacy of despair, undermining our

credibility in the Middle East, to say nothing of the thousands of

people whose lives are at risk.

I urge my colleagues to join me in passing comprehensive legislation

that will deal with this humanitarian crisis, at least for the people

who are most at risk for having put their trust in the United States as

they worked to help us.