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Statement of Chairman Bennie G. Thompson

“Crossing the Border: Immigrants in Detention and Victims of Trafficking, Part I”

March 15, 2007 (Washington) – Today, Committee on Homeland Security Chairman Bennie G. Thompson (D-MS) delivered the following prepared remarks for the Border, Maritime, and Global Counterterrorism Subcommittee hearing entitled “Crossing the Border: Immigrants in Detention and Victims of Trafficking, Part I”:

“I have long supported ending the policy of ‘catch and release,’ under which non-Mexicans who entered the U.S. without proper documentation were issued a notice to appear at a future hearing and then released. Of course, the overwhelming majority of these people did not appear for their hearing, but instead made their way to the interior of the country and disappeared into American society.

It is clear that catch and release was a failed policy. However, I am deeply concerned about the consequences of the Department’s new policy, often called ‘catch and return.’ Under this policy, virtually all other-than-Mexicans are being detained at facilities either operated by or under contract to ICE until they are returned to their home country.

The unprecedented rate at which the Department is detaining people raises questions about how to ensure their health and welfare and basic civil rights while in custody.

Also, for the first time ever, a significant number of families with children are being held in these detention facilities. I am greatly troubled by some of the allegations we have heard about the treatment of children who are caught up in these unfortunate circumstances through no fault of their own.

That is why I am interested in hearing testimony today about what Immigration and Customs Enforcement is doing to address these concerns. I also want to explore whether there are equally effective and less costly alternatives to detention that may be appropriate, particularly when children are involved.

I intend to work with my colleagues to ensure that as the Department implements tougher border enforcement and detention policies, we do so in a way that honors the rights and values that make our country great.”

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