



U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

STATEMENT

OF

MICHELLE BERNIER-TOTH

**SPECIAL ADVISOR FOR CHILDREN'S ISSUES
BUREAU OF CONSULAR AFFAIRS**

BEFORE THE

**HOUSE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS, SUBCOMMITTEE ON GLOBAL
HEALTH, GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS, AND INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

HEARING ON

INTERNATIONAL PARENTAL CHILD ABDUCTION

Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Wild, distinguished Members of the Subcommittee – thank you for the opportunity to engage again on an issue important to all of us, that of international parental child abduction. As Special Advisor for Children’s Issues at the Department of State, I have long shared your concern for the protection of children who are impacted by international parental child abduction and appreciated your support for efforts to resolve both individual cases as well as systemic challenges.

The International Framework of International Child Abduction

The welfare and safety of U.S. citizens abroad, especially vulnerable children, is one of the Department’s highest priorities. We work constantly to prevent international parental child abductions, facilitate the expeditious return of abducted children to their place of habitual residence, and strengthen and expand our partnerships under the 1980 Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction (Hague Abduction Convention, or Convention).

We believe the Hague Abduction Convention is one of the most effective frameworks for resolving abduction cases and preventing new ones. The concept is simple – barring a few narrow exceptions, when children are wrongfully removed or retained from their country of habitual residence, which is where competent authorities are best able to make a custody determination in the child’s best interests, they should be promptly returned there. When it works, the Convention is very effective. Unfortunately, it does not always work as intended, and in countries that are not yet our partners under the Convention, it is not a tool we can deploy at all. Promoting accession to, and proper

implementation of, the Hague Abduction Convention is therefore one of the most important tasks we have, and the focus of much of my work.

ICAPRA: Our Domestic Toolbox and Congressional Partner

On April 22, we submitted to Congress our 2024 Annual Report on International Child Abduction, as required by the Sean and David Goldman International Child Abduction Prevention and Return Act of 2014 (ICAPRA). The 2024 report identifies 16 countries for citation for “demonstrating a pattern of noncompliance.” Eleven of these countries (Argentina, Belize, Brazil, Bulgaria, Ecuador, Honduras, Montenegro, Peru, Poland, Republic of Korea, and Romania) are partners with the United States under the Hague Abduction Convention. Five of the cited countries (Egypt, India, Jordan, Russia, and the United Arab Emirates) are either not a party to the Convention or not a Convention partner with the United States. As in previous years, we also included information we hope is useful to parents, the legal community, law enforcement and others involved in addressing international parental child abductions.

It is important to note that the annual report is only one part of a continuous process of analysis and engagement throughout the year involving each cited country, as well as others in which we have concerns, and we are seeing progress in some of these countries.

Positive Progress Around the World

For example, while in **Lebanon** last year, I participated in a day-long workshop hosted by the U.S. Embassy that focused on international

parental child abduction and brought together representatives from Lebanese government ministries, law enforcement, judges, attorneys, and civil society organizations. This workshop opened the door to further dialogue among these and other stakeholders, at least raising awareness of the problem and the need for systemic solutions.

International parental child abduction was also once again on the agenda of our annual U.S.-**India** Consular Dialogue, which has resulted in regular collaboration with the Indian Embassy in Washington to prevent future abductions from the United States to India, while we continue to work through the Office of Children's Issues and our Mission in India on resolving individual cases.

We have engaged the **Republic of Korea** continually – including at the most senior levels – to urge them to enforce Convention return court orders effectively and promptly. We have also raised IPCA cases with **Japan** continually – including at the most senior levels – to resolve pre-Hague cases of abducted children and prevent new abductions.

In **Brazil**, our engagement is relentless: international parental child abduction is at the forefront of our annual U.S.-Brazil Consular Dialogues. Earlier this year, our team met with representatives from the Brazilian Supreme Court, Ministry of Justice, and other Brazilian stakeholders; in addition, the team conducted a multi-day training for our colleagues in the U.S. Mission to Brazil on how to help resolve these cases.

I traveled to **Argentina** in May where I pressed senior officials in the Foreign Ministry, civil society leaders, and elected officials and leadership within the Argentine Congress on the need for Argentina to expedite the resolution of Hague Abduction Convention cases.

In the Department's work around the world, we employ the tools that ICAPRA has provided. In addition, we serve demarches on the governments of cited countries and issue public statements as part of our ongoing diplomatic efforts to bring about better outcomes. While the tools in ICAPRA include measures like cancellation of assistance, we note that the assistance our government provides to other countries supports our national interests, which in many cases are complex and wide-ranging. Withholding assistance or invoking a sanction could undermine efforts in other areas, like promotion of the rule of law or compliance with international treaties like the Hague Abduction Convention. We also weigh carefully whether withholding assistance to one part of a foreign government will influence those who can make a difference on international parental child abduction, and what the unintended consequences might be for U.S. national interests.

We continued to make use of the International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP) to bring foreign officials and members of civil society to the United States to raise awareness of the impact of international parental child abduction and the need to resolve cases and challenges and promote accession to and successful implementation of the Convention. In the past year, the Department has hosted IVLP groups from Bulgaria, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Honduras, and the Dominican Republic for programs that either focused exclusively on international parental child abduction or included the topic on the agenda. As I

travel, I meet with former IVLP participants who tell me how the experience influenced their understanding of the Convention and the importance of its effective implementation. Many of these participants have spearheaded efforts in their own countries to improve understanding and operation of the Convention by sponsoring judicial seminars, drafting guidance, and promoting legislative changes aimed at strengthening compliance with the Convention.

Prevention Remains the Best Solution

We also work to prevent the heartache of international parental child abduction. ICAPRA has been instrumental in this regard by establishing the Prevent Abduction Program and enhancing collaboration among federal authorities. The Prevent Abduction Program and Children's Passport Issuance Alert Program (CPIAP) are important tools that parents can use to help prevent their children from being abducted to a foreign country. When a parent has registered their child in CPIAP, we can alert them if anyone applies for a U.S. passport on the child's behalf. In 2023, we enrolled over 3,700 children into CPIAP, bringing the total number to 66,000. Equally important, the Prevent Abduction Program can stop a child from leaving the United States via an airport. When a parent has provided us a valid, enforceable U.S. court order that prohibits the child's removal from the United States, CI works with our partners in U.S. Custom and Border Protection (CBP) and other law enforcement colleagues to seek to prevent the child from departing the United States. In 2023, CI enrolled 341 children into the Prevent Abduction Program. We value the close coordination and cooperation with CBP, as well as other U.S. law enforcement agencies, in carrying out this important function.

Parents need to know what steps they can take to prevent their child from being abducted overseas. CI conducts outreach and provides round-the-clock assistance to address parents' concerns about the possibility of an abduction. They have provided resources and guidance on the Department's website and are available 24/7 to parents and law enforcement authorities. In 2023, CI fielded over 4,600 prevention-related calls from parents, law enforcement officers, and others concerned that a child might be abducted by a parent.

These are all positive developments, but progress takes time and does not happen soon enough for the children and parents caught up in the tragedy of international parental child abduction. We recognize that these efforts do not satisfy the left-behind parent seeking their child's return. This is especially true for parents whose children were abducted to countries that are not U.S. partners under the Hague Abduction Convention, or who were abducted before our countries became partners under the Convention, and who have limited options for seeking their child's return. Even as we seek to make systemic progress with foreign governments, our teams in the Office of Children's Issues continue to work on behalf of individual children. I am proud of the work they do, and their dedication to this important mission.

We greatly appreciate the attention that you and other Members of Congress pay to this issue and value your partnership. We look forward to exploring ways that we can work together to demonstrate the U.S. government's commitment to the welfare and safety of vulnerable children by resolving challenges and preventing future abductions. Thank you.