

**International Child Abduction Prevention and Research Office  
ICAPRO  
University of Alabama in Huntsville**

**Statement**

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**U.S. House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Global  
Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations**

**Bring Abducted Children Home**

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Good morning and thank you, Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Wild, and members of this distinguished committee. In the decade since my own daughter's abduction and return, I have had privilege to be a voice for victimized children and families. I have felt weighty privilege of speaking for so many parents who have looked to you, looked to Congress, for leadership and oversight to require the State Department, the Justice Department, the Department of Homeland Security and all of their respective agencies charged with this issue, to enforce the laws concerning international parental child abduction, kidnapping and wrongful retention of American children held abroad.

I am the director of the International Parental Child Abduction Research and Prevention Office at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. It is the first university-based enterprise to drive research and data driven solutions to the global problem of International Parental Child Abduction. I'm also president emeritus and co-founder of iStand Parent Network Inc. iStand empowers parents to return their children from IPCA and advocates for legal and public policy reform to prevent and end this crime against children and families.

And I'm a survivor, like my brave, beautiful daughter, Muna, who on Christmas Day of 2011 was kidnapped by her father from Morehead, Kentucky to Mali, West Africa. She was only four years old. Despite some initial delays, I soon had court orders for her return, and cases with the FBI, the Department of State's Office of Children's Issues, and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children. In the Office of Children's Issues, I had frequent communication with my country officer, and a working relationship with embassy personnel in Bamako.

I worked closely with members of Congress, including Senator Rand Paul, and especially my beloved Senator Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, and your colleague, Rep. Hal Rogers. The later two stood shoulder to shoulder with me in a creative pressure campaign for two and a half years. Both directly engaged with the State Department, the FBI, and even high ranking officials in the Mali government. It was very clear to people on two continents that the Kentucky delegation was serious about its constituent's well being and her need to be home.

I was reunited with Muna on July 11, 2014 in what can only be described as a whole-of-government approach, which is why my daughter is home and currently completing her last week of high school freshman year. Unfortunately, my family's experience is rare, but it should not be. This nation has the systems, structures, resources, and international standing to repatriate U.S. children, and to hold nations accountable until they comply in releasing America's Stolen Children.

I've recently come to know my fellow parent John Sichi. John's two small children were abducted from San Francisco to South Korea in 2019, and have not yet been returned to California. They were both toddlers at the time of the abduction; his son wasn't quite three years old, and his daughter had just turned one. Despite receiving a finalized Korean Supreme Court Hague return order in February 2022, he hasn't been permitted to see children at all.

His children have been cut off from him, and the lifelong emotional damage being done to them day by day is immense. Since last October John has staged a public protest in Seoul, walking for hours on a portable treadmill, demonstrating the plight of every left-behind parent who is trying and trying to reach their children, doing everything they can, but not getting anywhere. Even the Korean public and media are sympathetic and supportive of my quest, yet the Korean government has shown little regard for the Hague return order or his daily demonstration for his children.

Our nation has twice cited this Hague partner for noncompliance, including this year. What I find remarkable and inspiring is that John has walked nearly 600 kilometers on the treadmill, and people often ask him how he manages to keep going day after day. His answer is always the same: how could he give up when my kids need help? This is the question that parents of internationally abducted children ask and answer every day. The impact of this visceral metaphor cannot be understated. I hope we are now thinking about John and all parents who are on this "treadmill"-- exerting all of their heart, energy, time, money, and resources-- without their children coming home.

When I first learned of John's story I was filled with admiration for this arduous and loving tribute to his abducted children. That admiration quickly gave way to sorrow, empathy, and frustration. John's Sichi's 'treadmill experience' embodies those of too many other parents, and stands in stark contrast with my whole-of-government response leading to my daughter's return.

I'm not the only one. Alissa Zagaris is in the audience today. Alissa returned her son, Leo, home from wrongful retention in Greece in March 2013, after 20 months of alienation and separation, through fierce devotion, unrelenting action, and strong governmental response. By contrast, Alissa is sitting next to Samina

Rahman and her son, Abadallah. This is a special day, Mr. Chairman, because this is the first time Alissa and long-time advocates like myself have met Abdallah. You see, Samina was on the treadmill for 9.5 years. From April 2013 to December 2023, she was on the treadmill while the United States and India traded hollow niceties about resolving abductions.

Over nearly a decade, she watched India get pass after pass, demarche after hollow demarche, and watched that nation race unfettered to the top 5 rankings for destination countries of abduction. She had to watch from the United States as he grew from a small boy into a teen, as he missed years of school. Most tragically, she had to watch her father die without ever seeing the grandson he helped to raise until the abduction.

In the end, Abdallah is home through a voluntary return, not through the hundreds of thousands of dollars that his mother expended in U.S. and Indian courts; not through a scam for which she and other parents were bilked of precious resources by someone who knew exactly how to exploit the still-fragmented, post-Goldman Act inefficiencies in U.S. systems; and certainly not through the help of her own government.

Samina is sitting with her son here today because of indefatigable mother's love, sheer fortitude, resource capacity, and because Abdallah loves his mother and wants to be with her. How many other abducted children yearn to be with their parent, but whose parents don't have similar means, support, or wherewithal to sustain their case through costly engagements with two or more governments, language barriers, and fragmented or nonexistent government response?

Before I offer recommendations for improving federal performance to aid victimized American children and their families, I'd like to relate the experience of one more parent. Astrid Johnson, a mother in the audience today, is on the treadmill. In August 2021, Astrid's Missing Angels, Charlotte and Georgia, were abducted to and retained in Dubai by their father after a planned trip for summer vacation.

Astrid has done everything she can—expending her resources, obtaining an international kidnapping warrant, and achieving favorable rulings in Dubai. The Dubai courts rejected the father's unfounded custody petitions and further ruled

that it had no jurisdiction to hear the case. It's my understanding that federal marshals are standing by, ready to travel and execute the warrant.

Yet, even with these mechanisms in place, the pace of federal action and response to reunite her and her children has been too slow. Time is the number one enemy of internationally abducted children. As Ms. Johnson case indicates, inaction or slow action by the very entities charged with assisting this vulnerable population is enemy number two.

It's time for resolute action by our government to bring these children home. It's time for the State Department to act on the United Arab Emirates twice-cited noncompliance. It's time for the United Arab Emirates to reject the father's forum shopping and fake travel ban request. It's time for the United States to stand with Astrid Johnson to bring Georgia and Charlotte home.

When the Goldman Act was signed into law in 2014, we had tempered expectations for its full and aggressive implementation. Over the past nine years however, even our most measured expectations for the State Department to fulfill its mandates have been disappointed. Instead, our children remain kidnapped to foreign nations, separated from their seeking parents and extended families, and parents remain on the treadmill— driven by love for their children, and a hope that our government will be true to what it says it will do for both. Mr. Chairman, it's time now to amend the Goldman Act to bring abducted children home.

I respectfully offer the following recommendations to improve federal response, prevent international parental child abductions, and reunite children with loving parents and families:

**Recommendation 1: Give Congress greater authority and oversight capabilities to respond to and aid constituent requests.**

- Currently, the law mandates a written notification to Members of Congress, Senators, and delegates of all cases reported by a parent to the US Central Authority.
- When the Goldman Act was signed into law in 2014, the State Department only reported on new cases and when the parent signed a privacy waiver. It did not encourage parents to sign the privacy waiver.

- We've observed the State Department to assert there is not a waiver on file in cases when they are known to be on file.
- Even if a parent is aware and elects not to sign the privacy waiver numerical data can and should be shared.
- Members of Congress should have all the information necessary to represent their most vulnerable constituents.

**Recommendation 2: Fund research on International Parental Child Abduction, governmental performance, and impacts on children and families.**

- Appropriate and authorize studies by an appropriate non-governmental organization on the grave harm to abducted children and left-behind parents as a result of international parental child abduction.
- IPCA is an under-studied public policy problem. A lack of rigorous, contemporary research and publicly available information on this phenomenon contributes to low issue saliency, low return rates for internationally-abducted children, and fragmented governmental response leading to inadequate and conflicting policy and program outcomes.
- This research gap also constrains policy makers, limits effective stakeholder prevention and response, incentivizes nations to be noncompliant in returning abducted children, and inhibits families' efforts to reunite with their abducted children. Congress should authorize and appropriate funding to close the knowledge gap, identify and correct implementation failures, and generate new policy solutions for victimized children and families.

**Recommendation 3: Fund training across relevant sectors to effectively educate and prepare responders, the legal community to consistently uphold the rule of law concerning internationally kidnapped children and victimized families.**

- Appropriate and authorize training of domestic and foreign family law, judges and law enforcement on the harm of international parental child abduction and prevention.

- Fund high-quality, creative, flexible and cost-effective education and training programs that increase individual and organizational capacity to prevent and resolve abductions.

**Recommendation 4: Help parents wage and win this costly battle to reunite with their victimized, internationally kidnapped children.**

- Amend the Victims of Crime Act to include international parental child abduction and make legal expenses from the crime victims fund available for parents in attempting to repatriate their children.

These recommendations, and those of my fellow panelists, provide Congress with a way forward, and robust recommendations to amend existing law to better support children and families and to bring abducted children home, as the title of the hearing so aptly states. Thank you again for this great privilege. I welcome questions from the Committee.