

Rep. Suraj Budathoki
Manchester, New Hampshire

Honorable Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Suraj Budathoki, and I represent Hillsborough County District 40 in the New Hampshire House of Representatives. I am also a business owner, a father of two, and a doctoral student in transformative social change.

First, I want to thank State Senator Reynolds and this committee for highlighting this critical issue.

In my testimony, I want to reflect on the relationship between the United States and Bhutan, what the world has said about Bhutan's human rights record, and why this resolution is necessary.

Although the U.S. and Bhutan do not have formal diplomatic ties, they maintain friendly, informal relations through the U.S. Embassy in New Delhi and Bhutan's Mission to the United Nations in New York (U.S. Department of State). Since the 1980s, the U.S. has supported Bhutan through USAID, helping with education, health care, infrastructure, and disaster preparedness. Bhutanese professionals have also benefited from U.S. programs like the Fulbright Scholarships, the International Visitors Leadership Program, and the Humphrey Fellowships (Asia News Network, 2025).

At the same time, the international community has raised serious concerns about human rights violations in Bhutan. In 1997, the UN Commission on Human Rights urged Bhutan to allow the voluntary and dignified return of refugees expelled in the 1990s due to their ethnicity, language, religion, or political opinions (UN Commission on Human Rights, 1997).

During peaceful protests in the early 1990s, thousands were arrested under harsh security laws. Many were detained without trial or access to their families—some even disappeared. According to the UN Working Group on Arbitrary Detention, these arrests were illegal under international law. Human Rights Watch has confirmed that at least 37 political prisoners are still being held—some sentenced to life. Those arrested in 2008 were found distributing political pamphlets and literature, peaceful expressions of their political rights, and freedom of speech (UNWGAD, 2022; Human Rights Watch, 2023).

In 2015, the New Hampshire General Court (state house) adopted a resolution recognizing the contributions of Bhutanese refugees to New Hampshire and requested that the United States government work diligently to resolve the Bhutanese refugee crisis, reach an agreement allowing for the option of repatriation, and promote human rights and democracy in Bhutan.

The U.S. State Department has repeatedly reported Bhutan's human rights issues, including arbitrary arrests, restrictions on free speech, and discrimination against minorities, especially the Lhotshampa community (U.S. Department of State, 2023). In 2023, the U.S. House of Representatives introduced House Resolution 228, holding Bhutan responsible for expelling over 100,000 citizens and calling for accountability (U.S. House of Representatives, 2023).

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During Bhutan's Universal Periodic Review at the United Nations, many countries called for reforms to protect freedom of expression, minority rights, and the safe return of refugees (Universal Periodic Review, 2024). Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch have also documented Bhutan's human rights violations for decades.

After all of these, the reality of exiled Bhutanese is heartbreaking. Nearly 100,000 Bhutanese Americans now live in this great nation—many as U.S. citizens holding American passports. Yet, the government of Bhutan refuses to recognize these passports and continues to deny visas, even for family reunification or to attend the funerals of loved ones. Around 7,000 Bhutanese refugees still hope to return home one day. Meanwhile, at least 37 political prisoners remain behind bars in Bhutan, serving life sentences without parole and facing inhumane treatment. Some of their family members live right here in this state. They are not even allowed to speak with their loved ones by phone.

How long must families remain separated before the world takes meaningful action?

The United States has been a generous partner to Bhutan, but the suffering of Bhutanese refugees—many of whom are now proud U.S. citizens—has never been resolved. Accountability and justice are long overdue.

This resolution is more than symbolic. It calls for truth, justice, and healing. It urges Bhutan to recognize past injustices, restore dignity to its displaced people, and support family reunification and voluntary return. I stand by this.

We want to be clear: we did not want to take this path. All we ever sought was justice—to find common ground, address our differences, and build reconciliation. We even sent a peace proposal to the King of Bhutan. But we were not heard. Our calls for dialogue were ignored. We are now left with no choice but to strengthen our advocacy.

Still, we remain hopeful and call for sincere, inclusive dialogue rooted in human dignity.

I respectfully ask this committee to support this resolution and reaffirm the United States' moral leadership in standing up for human rights and the Bhutanese American community.

Thank you.

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