

Beat: Travel

FINAL PART - U.S. SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIALS RESPOND TO THE PRESS

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USPA NEWS - OPERATOR: And the next question from the line of Brian Naylor of NPR. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks. A question about the UNHCR's role. So does a refugee say, 'I want to come to the U.S.,' they go to the UN and the UNHCR places them? How does that work?

OPERATOR: And the next question from the line of Brian Naylor of NPR. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks. A question about the UNHCR's role. So does a refugee say, 'I want to come to the U.S.,' they go to the UN and the UNHCR places them? How does that work?

SENIOR STATE DEPARTMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Well, the United States is the top funder of UNHCR, the UN refugee agency, in its work all around the world, and they are a partner of ours in carrying out the U.S. refugee admissions program. What they do is they're very well placed to look at the small fraction of the world's refugees for whom resettlement in a new country may make the most sense.

So these are people who have been traumatized or victims of torture or witnessed terrible things happening to their families in front of their eyes, widows with small children, people with medical cases that might survive better in a place with more modern medicine available.

And they know a lot about U.S. rules and regs, and so they will refer refugees to us, refugee individuals or families. Each of these makes a case. And they will refer them to the U.S. program, and then the U.S. system takes over.

So we fund resettlement support centers in certain regions around the world, and there we have organizations that help us then talk to the refugees, prepare their case histories, put the file together, and get them ready for that interview by "the all-important interview from the Department of Homeland Security, and make sure then if they're accepted for the program they get some cultural orientation and that they understand what's going on along the way, and they understand things like that they shouldn't pay anyone for participation in this program and that their lives in America will be different, and that sort of expectations of what happens once they come here.

So UNHCR is very important at the start of the program, but the State Department and DHS take over after the referrals are made.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO: (Inaudible.)

MODERATOR: Go ahead. I'm sorry.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO: I was just "this is Speaker Number Two to just reiterate [Senior Administration Official One]'s point that --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: That's Speaker Number One to you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO: Speaker Number One, sorry. The "it really "it is DHS who decides whether a case is approved or not. So as [Senior Administration Official One] described, UNHCR is that initial filter.

Out of all the refugees they register, they're making that decision of who are the very, very few who are going to be considered for

resettlement by any resettlement country. And like they know what our rules are in the U.S., they understand the rules of the other resettlement countries. So they might look for something "" if someone already has a relative in a particular country, that would be a reason to think about resettling to Australia or Canada in lieu of the United States. But they're just making that first sort of filter. It's the U.S. Government that is making the decision and adjudicating the cases.

MODERATOR: Great, thank you. Time for a few more questions. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Next question from Jonathan Tamari of Philadelphia Inquirer. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. One of the criticisms we've heard from congressmen in our area is that it's not necessarily the screening process but being able to do it on such a large scale with the numbers that have been discussed. What capacity do you have to handle that kind of increase, or how would you respond to his criticism that basically you can't handle the huge numbers that are being talked about in the future here ?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Well --

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL THREE: I can "" this is Official Number Three. I can start on that. We screen vastly larger numbers than what we are talking about with respect to refugees already, so we can certainly scale on this population. It will require us adapting and flexing, but I think it's well within our capacity given the large numbers of travelers and other kinds of screening and vetting that we do that's significantly larger than what we're talking about here.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: This is Speaker One. First, I want to point out that the U.S. can be a home for many more refugees than we are currently bringing in, and we've seen how we easily absorbed a couple hundred thousand Vietnamese who came during the height of that resettlement program. What we are going to do in the year going forward is to increase our current operations from bringing 70,000 refugees from around the world to 85,000 refugees from around the world.

We can do that, and it's a bit of a stretch, but we can do it. I'm confident of it. We were already planning to expand the program just at the working level "" to propose an expansion of the program before the Secretary announced in September that we would be bringing 85,000 this year.

Bringing more refugees, though, is absolutely dependent on having the resources to run the program. And as it expands further, it'll "" this will be dependent on continued support from Congress, from the appropriations committees especially, to fund the program.

And in both the State Department and at DHS "" and also at Health and Human Services that provides assistance to states for the refugees who need it beyond the first 90 days "" all of our programs are set up to do more than run the resettlement program, because DHS, USCIS also has to review asylum applications in the United States. And then we also run programs, as you know, to support humanitarian operations overseas in the places where there are refugees and displaced people and other victims of conflict.

So the program is absolutely dependent on funding from Congress, and as we grow it we will require more assistance from Congress. But for this year, the year where we want to bring 85,000 refugees, I believe we can do that.

MODERATOR: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Thank you. And next question from the line of William LaJeunesse of Fox News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Yes, my question is this: Can you tell me when or where the next state or city is on your list to accept the next group of Syrians ?

And then secondly, can you give me a rough demographic breakdown of, say, the 2,500 Syrians we've taken in recently "" women, children, those under 18, that kind of thing ?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Well, the way the program works is we have these nine networks that are nationwide, and they meet once a week. And they work with our office to determine where to send refugees on a weekly basis. And sometimes it's based on family unification. If a refugee has a relative already in the United States, the priority would be to try to settle them somewhere near those relatives. If a refugee has a relative already in the United States, the priority would be to try to settle them

somewhere near those relatives. And then secondly, it might be based on whether there are special programs that meet the special needs of some of these most vulnerable refugees.

As I mentioned before, like if you have a child who's a burn victim, you would seek a city where there was a hospital that could handle that. And then otherwise it's based on where the resettlement agencies think the refugees can thrive. States where there's low unemployment would be a priority over places where it'll be difficult for refugees to find jobs, especially those jobs at the bottom of the economic ladder, which many refugees are prepared to accept.

And so it's not a plan where we sit down and say let's go to this city this month and to another city the next month. It's a nationwide program that is very vibrant and adjusts based on what local communities can handle.

Half of the Syrian refugees brought to the U.S. so far have been children; a quarter are adults over 60. And I think you will have heard that only 2 percent are single males of combat age.

So we "" there's slightly more "" it's roughly 50/50 men and women, slightly more men I would say, but not "" not a lot more men. So this is normal that as you're "" as we set a priority of bringing the most vulnerable people, we're going to have female-headed households with a lot of children, and we're going to have extended families that are maybe missing the person who used to be the top breadwinner but have several generations "" grandparents, a widowed mother, and children.

MODERATOR: Great. We just have time for two more questions. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: And the next question. It comes from the line of Julia Preston of New York Times.

QUESTION: Yes. Could you tell me please how long the process is taking now for the Syrian and also the Iraqi refugees end to end, number one ? And number two, if the governors persist in demanding a halt to the program, what are you going to do with the Syrian refugees ? Will you send them to the states where the governors are still willing to accept them?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Well, just as we're talking to you all in the press today, we'll be talking to the governors today. I believe there's a call being organized for them and for some mayors. And we've also taken calls from individual governors who've called in to learn more about the program and double-check that we're doing a good job on the security front.

The "" how long the process takes: our average remains 18 to 24 months, and we are "" and that's the same for all categories. I don't have an average for Syrians and Iraqis to share with you. As you know, we are trying to look at the process and see if we can make it more efficient without cutting corners on security.

MODERATOR: Great. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Okay. And the next question comes from the line of Laura Koran of CNN. Please go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you so much for doing this call. I just wanted to follow up on an earlier question a little bit. Given that the increase that the Administration is considering in the number of refugees "" Syrian refugees specifically "" over the next year is more than five-fold what's been accepted in the entire course of the Syrian conflict so far, can you just give a little bit more detail about the specific steps that are being taken to ensure that the screening process remains rigorous as the number of casefiles are growing...

...both in terms of the resources that are going to be applied to this in the future, support for resettlement agencies, and then especially if these state and local resources are threatened by the kinds of actions that some of these governors and legislators are threatening? If you don't get the additional support from Congress, then how can you still, I guess, meet this quota ? Thank you.

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL ONE: Well, I think the entire program is contingent on support of the American people. It is contingent "" as all programs in the United States Government are, we're contingent on our funding from Congress. And this program has benefited over the years from strong bipartisan support.

The thing I don't want to lose "" and let me be very honest about this "" I really don't "" I mean, I'm honest anyway most of the time "" (laughter) "" but the thing I most fear about this current discussion going on in the United States is that we will lose the bipartisan support for this program that it has enjoyed for decades,...

...through Democratic administrations, through Republican administrations, through difference majorities in the House and Senate. And so this is a very precious thing, I think, and it's "" in the current day and age, it's been a rare thing. So I hope that that continues.

Speaker Two, do you want to talk a little bit more about the overall process for the Syrians ?

SENIOR ADMINISTRATION OFFICIAL TWO: Well, for us, a big part of how we are scaling up in the near term is borrowing from other parts of the agency. So we're not just relying on our existing fulltime refugee officers, but we have officer, adjudicators who are experienced in other programs.

For example, our domestic asylum program has officers who are experienced in protection law. And so we are seeking volunteers from that program who will be able to augment the staff who are sent overseas to do refugee interviews. And we're also pulling from some other parts of the agency as well who "" people who are well-trained and who will receive an increment of additional training in order to participate in the refugee program.

So in terms of being able to scale our program in the near term, that's what we're working on while we're working on longer-term, or middle-term and longer-term hiring of staff that we need to be able to support a larger refugee program in Fiscal Year 2017 and the future.

MODERATOR: Great. Thank you so much to our three speakers today and to all of you in the media who joined us on relatively short notice. Very much appreciate it. I think that's all we have time for today. I hope we answered many, if not all, of your questions, and appreciate, again, your participation. And that's all. Everybody have a great day.

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