

Press Releases: Background Briefing: U.S. Government Officials On the Refugee Cap for Fiscal Year 2018

Special Briefing
Via Teleconference
September 27, 2017

MODERATOR: Thank you. Well, good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to our conference call today to talk about the Fiscal Year 2018 Refugee Admissions Program. With us we have [U.S. Government Official One], and also [U.S. Government Official Two]. This call is on background, attributed to U.S. Government officials, and will be embargoed until 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time today, September the 27th.

And with that, I will turn it over to [U.S. Government Official One]. And let me mention one other thing, and that is please try to limit your questions to one per person. We have a lot of people on the call, and a lot of ground to cover.

[U.S. Government Official One], go ahead.

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Thank you, Heather, and thanks, everyone, for joining. Today in fulfillment of Section 20(c), (d) (1), and (e) of the Immigration and Nationality Act^[1], the administration will consult with Congress on the FY 2018 U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. That will be accomplished through the annual report to Congress and through the consultations carried out by the Secretary of State, the acting secretary of the Department of Homeland Security, and HHS director of the Office of Refugee Resettlement, with members of the Senate and House judiciary committees.

The Secretary will brief Congress that the admission – that the administration proposes that the U.S. Government admit up to 45,000 refugees from around the world in FY 2018. The congressional consultation will inform the official presidential determination on refugee admissions, which is expected to be issued in the coming days. The regional breakdowns will be: Africa, 19,000; East Asia, 5,000; Europe and Central Asia, 2,000; Latin America and the Caribbean, 1,500; Near East South Asia, 17,000^[2].

The security and safety of the American people is our chief concern. While maintaining the United States leadership role in humanitarian protection, an integral part of this mission is to ensure that refugee resettlement

opportunities only go to those who are eligible for such protection and who are not known to present a risk to the safety and security of our country. Though the review required by Section 6 of the executive order is still underway, DHS and other relevant agencies have started strengthening the vetting process used in the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program.

With this new ceiling, the United States will continue to permanently resettle more refugees than any other country, and we will continue to offer protection to the most vulnerable of those who have been persecuted because of race, ethnicity, political opinion, nationality, religion, or membership in a particular social group.

Since 1975, the United States has welcomed more than 3 million refugees from all over the world. The U.S. Refugee Admissions Program will continue to be administrated as a public-private partnership with important contributions by NGO and civic group partners around the country in close cooperation with state and local authorities.

It is important to understand that refugee resettlement is only one part of the United States response to the crisis of forced displacement around the world. The United States also remains the world's leading donor of humanitarian assistance, providing over \$7 billion in humanitarian assistance around the world last year. In Fiscal Year 2017, the United States has provided more than 1.4 billion in humanitarian assistance for the Syria crisis, and more than 581 million for the Iraq crisis. We have provided nearly 2.5 billion for people from countries facing famine. And we have provided nearly \$95 million for displaced persons in Burma and the region.

The United States is the number-one contributor to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and we continue to be the leading donor to other agencies to provide life-saving support for refugees and conflict victims, including the Red Cross Movement, the World Food Program, UN – UNICEF, the International Organization for Migration, and a wide range of nongovernmental humanitarian organizations. This support provides life-saving assistance to refugees and conflict victims close to their home countries with a view to enabling refugees to return to their homes voluntarily and in safety when commissioned – when conditions permit.

Our humanitarian programs also contribute to the stability of refugee-hosting countries like Turkey, Jordan, Kenya, and Bangladesh that collectively are supporting millions of refugees in their countries. Thank you.

MODERATOR: Okay. [U.S. Government Official Two].

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL TWO: Actually, I'm going to turn this over to [U.S. Government Administration Official Three].

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL THREE: Sure, thanks, [U.S. Government Official Two]. I think I'll just expand a little bit on what [U.S. Government Official One] already mentioned in terms of security screening since that's such a big focus of what DHS and USCIS does as part of the Refugee Admissions Program.

So the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program works with a number of governmental and nongovernmental partners both abroad and in the U.S. to process refugees and to conduct security screenings. Refugee applicants are subject to intensive biographic and biometric security checks at multiple stages during the process. This includes immediately before a refugee's departure to the United States as well as upon his or her arrival in the United States. Through close coordination with the federal law enforcement and intelligence communities, these checks are continually reviewed and enhanced to address specific populations that could pose particular threats.

DHS has remained vigilant in its commitment to the integrity of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program. We have continually worked to employ new checks and tools over the years to enhance security and we will continue to do so. Under President Trump's EO 13780, all screening and adjudicative protocols are now being reviewed to determine what additional enhancements should be made. The 120-day review of the refugee program concludes on October 24th and we're considering a wide range of potential measures and enhancements.

In addition to traditional security checks, of course, U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services officers continue to conduct extensive interviews with each refugee applicant which serve to develop all relevant issues related to eligibility for refugee resettlement, the credibility of the applicant, and admissibility to enter the United States. The DHS goal, of course, is to ensure that these dedicated and well-trained staff have the tools that they need as they work tirelessly to ensure the integrity of the program overall and make the right decisions. Thank you.

MODERATOR: And with that, we'll take the first question.

OPERATOR: Okay. And ladies and gentlemen, if you do have a question at this time, please press * then 1. Our first question comes from the line of Josh Lederman with AP. Please, go ahead, sir.

QUESTION: Hey, thank you so much for doing the call. Considering that elements of the administration had pushed for a cap that was far lower than what you announced today, there's been a lot of speculation that the plan for the administration is to authorize a cap of 45,000, but then, basically slow-walk processing and actual entrance so that by the end of the fiscal year, you end up with a number of actually admitted refugees that's far lower than 45,000. Can you state unequivocally that that's not the case, that you plan to work diligently to try to get up to that cap or to process as many refugees as possible? Thanks.

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL ONE: I state unequivocally that that's not our goal, to slow-roll it, and we have every plan to process as many refugees as we can under this ceiling. And it's important to remember the ceiling and that in past years, many times we haven't reached the ceiling. The number we process will depend on our ability to process, new vetting requirements that we're putting out, DHS's interviewing capacity, especially taking into account their need to tackle the domestic asylum backlog. But this number was reached after taking a look at these requirements, and we believe that we can get into the ballpark of this number, of this ceiling.

MODERATOR: [U.S. Government Official Three], anything there?

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL THREE: Yeah, I would just add when we're looking at protection, we've spent a lot of time in the recent past looking at refugee resettlement as humanitarian protection and that is a huge piece of protection strategy, but the truth of the matter is, is that we also have individuals who are already here in the United States who are seeking protection domestically. And so what we're looking at is a strategy to be able to deal with those particular cases.

We have hundreds of thousands of individuals who are making these requests domestically, and we need to be able to devote resources to begin processing those cases, and there are two very good reasons. The first is this is a bad situation for people to be lingering in a backlog if they are legitimate – had legitimate asylum claims. And then, of course, there's an integrity issue, because when you have lingering backlogs it can attract frivolous asylum applications from people who will continue to sit in a backlog and receive employment authorization. So for purposes of ensuring that we are addressing the legitimate claims of domestic asylum seekers as well as addressing the frivolous claims, we really need to be able to devote more resources on the asylum side, as [U.S. Government Official One] mentioned.

MODERATOR: Next question, please.

OPERATOR: And pardon me, just a moment for the next question. Our next question comes from the line of Felicia Schwartz with *The Wall Street Journal*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, everyone. Thanks so much for doing this. First, have you sent the report to Congress about the refugee decision? And second, the 1980 Refugee Act talks about getting refugees sort of economically self-sufficient. You seem to be focusing more here on having refugees be able to return home. Is there a shift in how the U.S. is viewing its refugee policy under the Trump administration?

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So the first – the answer to the first question is we plan to send the report before the consultations later this afternoon. The second answer is – is there a shift? Our emphasis has always been – the worldwide humanitarian emphasis has always been to have people go home voluntarily and safely when the conditions are right. That's number one. And number two, or the second durable solution, as it's referred to in humanitarian lingo, is settlement in their country of first asylum. The third durable goal has always been resettlement in other countries. It's always been less than 1 percent of the total number of refugees worldwide. So it's always been a relatively small number.

I've just been told that the report is being sent now to the Hill.

MODERATOR: Okay. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: The question comes the line of Yeganeh Torbati with Reuters. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. Thanks a lot. So what happens at the end of the 120-day freeze on the entry of refugees? Do all – do refugees from all countries – are they then eligible to enter again? And basically what I'm trying to get at is the countries that are on the travel ban list, are their citizens eligible to enter as refugees or are they going to face restriction?

Hello?

MODERATOR: Yes.

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Yes, I'm there. Sorry. So we're still undergoing the security view mandated by the executive order during the 120-day pause, and together, State Department and Homeland Security and Director of National Intelligence, we're reviewing the admissions process and identifying additional procedures to enhance the safety and security of the program. So we plan to implement changes to the USRAP before the end of the 120-day review on October 24th. The results of this 120-day review will ensure that the program is aligned and in step with the most advanced threat assessment and prevention techniques across the U.S. Government. We haven't reached the end of that process yet, so when we do, we'll have a better answer to that question.

MODERATOR: [U.S. Government Official Three], do you have anything to add?

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL THREE: No, [U.S. Government Official One] has covered it.

MODERATOR: Okay. Thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from the line of Nick Wadhams with Bloomberg News. Please, go ahead, sir.

QUESTION: Hi. Thank you. Just two very quick questions. One, I believe this is the lowest number of refugee – refugees being allowed in terms of the annual ceiling since the – since 1980. So, I mean, can you give a sort of more concise reason for why this time around you've decided to cut the number to the lowest, essentially, it's ever been?

And then also, on the vetting procedures, given that it currently takes about two years to vet refugees under the current system, how long do you anticipate it will take under the new measures? Thank you.

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So to your first question, at 45,000 the United States will continue to be the largest refugee resettlement country in the world. Canada, the next-largest resettlement country, intends to admit approximately 25,000 in 2018; and Australia, third in rank, will likely admit approximately 18,000.

State and DHS have determined the ceiling of 45,000 refugees is consistent with our foreign policy goals and operational capacity in light of additional security vetting procedures that we are implementing, as well as the domestic asylum backlogs that DHS is currently facing.

The safety and security of the American people is our chief concern. In response to Section 6(a) of Executive Order 13780, the State Department is working with the Department of Homeland Security and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence to review the refugee admissions application, security vetting, and adjudication process. The interagency is continuing to work closely together to uphold the security of the United States.

For your second question, the 18 months to two years number is based on an average of current cases, and we'll just have to see how we progress over the last months – month – the next few months to get a new estimate of how long it will take us to move cases through the pipeline.

QUESTION: So you have no current estimation for how long this process will now take?

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL ONE: I'm not sure that it will increase beyond 18 to 24 months. I won't know until – we've never made projections on how long a process will take in the future. We've always told people how long it is taken right – taking right now.

MODERATOR: Okay, thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Next question comes from the line of Laura Koran with CNN.

QUESTION: Hi, thanks so much for doing the call. I was hoping you could tell us whether you've been in touch with the resettlement groups here in the U.S. as part of the consultation process and were they given any kind of heads-up about this change. Part of the reason I'm asking is because from my understanding, they actually receive funding based on the number of refugees they resettle, so this is going to dramatically increase their ability to operate. Is that a concern that was factored in at all? Thank you.

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL ONE: We are in constant consultations with the refugee resettlement groups. As I mentioned in my remarks, we have a unique public-private system which works very well in resettling refugees in the United States. We did not, however, let them know what the number would be for this year because that's – that was only made public today, and we didn't give them any advance notice. On the other hand, they're well aware of the executive order's number of 50,000 and that I think this is probably in the range that they expected.

MODERATOR: Okay. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Our next question comes from the line of Kylie Atwood with CBS News. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi there. Thanks again for doing this. Just kind of looping back to something that you mentioned earlier when Nick asked about this number and how it was decided on, you said it was consistent with the foreign policy goals of this administration. So which goals exactly is it consistent with in that realm?

And the second question is: When the review is done at the end of October, could this cap change or is this something that is set in stone for now? Thank you.

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So foreign policy goals – first of all, the safety and security of the American people is number one. We want to make sure that this is a secure process and that no one is allowed through that might endanger the security of America.

Secondly, our humanitarian goals, which are to help people fleeing from war and violence. We do that chiefly with assistance overseas, but we want to maintain a robust resettlement program for the small percentage of people that are vulnerable in their situation and need to be moved, and we think that the current program will do that.

MODERATOR: [U.S. Government Official Three], anything?

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL THREE: No, nothing to add.

MODERATOR: Okay. Thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Next question comes from the line of Gardiner Harris with *The New York Times*. Please, go ahead, sir.

QUESTION: Hi, guys. You keep talking about there being enough resources to handle both the – those already here domestically as well as abroad, which suggests that there is a very finite amount of resources and there's some sort of zero-sum game. Are you asking Congress for more resources to do this vetting so that you can have enough resources to both vet the people domestically as well as those abroad?

Also, the legislation seems to call on the administration to do its consultation two weeks prior to actually the cap going into effect. You don't seem to have followed that legislative requirement. Can you respond to that? Thanks.

MODERATOR: I think the first part's a [U.S. Government Official Three] question, so [U.S. Government Official Three], let's hand that over to you.

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL THREE: Sure. So USCIS is actually fee-funded, so what that means is individuals who are applying for various immigration benefits pay extra so that we can operate the refugee program and the asylum program, which do not have any fees associated with them. So to say that – so in terms of asking for Congress, that isn't something that we would do, because we're actually not appropriated.

We are taking a look at our resource needs and we're assessing them now, reviewing our staffing allocation models, but as you know, staffing up, even if we were told tomorrow that they would give us finite resources, takes time to get people on board and through the extensive training that we require for our officers who are doing this kind of work. And that's why starting now it's very helpful for us to be able to use resources from the refugee program to do asylum work, just as we have used asylum resources in the past to

supplement refugee work to get to higher admissions levels.

MODERATOR: I think – yeah, [U.S. Government Official One] will handle the second part of that question. Go right ahead, [U.S. Government Official One].

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Yeah, the legislation I believe says two weeks to the extent possible, and we have done this in less than two weeks in the past.

MODERATOR: Okay, there we go. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Next question comes from the line of Brian Bennett with *The Los Angeles Times*. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi, thank you for holding this call. Can you speak to the decision to reduce the cap on refugees and put it in the context of a broader effort to reduce the foreign born population in the United States by the Trump administration?

MODERATOR: I'm not sure – this is [Moderator] here – I'm not sure I understand that question. I would certainly take issue with the premise of that.

QUESTION: Well, the President has made many statements about wanting to reduce the foreign born population of the U.S., especially in the context of having jobs available for American workers, and this is in that context and I wanted to see if there were discussions on reducing the refugee cap in the context of reducing the foreign born population in the country.

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL ONE: No, no there weren't.

QUESTION: [Moderator], do you have anything else to say on that?

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL ONE: No.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Next question.

OPERATOR: Question comes from the line of Conor Finnegan with ABC News.

QUESTION: Hey, thanks very much for holding the call. I want to go back to something that [U.S. Government Official One] had said in response to Kylie's question. Why specifically do you believe that a lower cap does more to protect the security of the American people if all these refugees are undergoing the same vetting procedures?

MODERATOR: [U.S. Government Official Three]?

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL THREE: I can't speak to the cap; I can only speak to the need to be able to ensure that we're doing the most stringent checks possible and that those evolve over time. Obviously, when – when considering the cap, we look at the impact that those security checks may have on our ability to process individuals from overseas to resettlement. As [U.S. Government Official One] said earlier, it's difficult to predict right now

what these new security enhancements will do in terms of the impact of that refugee flow, but that is certainly something that is considered in terms of operational capacity.

MODERATOR: Okay. Next question –

QUESTION: (Inaudible) about the – about the national security implications for the American people?

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Say again?

MODERATOR: Go ahead. What was your question? Hello?

OPERATOR: Pardon me, Mr. Finnegan, your line is open again, sir.

QUESTION: Thank you. So I'm just – I'm just asking if the cap is about whether or not you'll have the capacity to process all these people, why were we talking earlier that it's about protecting the American people's national security?

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Because part of what sets the amount of people that we can bring in is the vetting procedure, and the vetting procedure is tied to security.

MODERATOR: Okay. Thank you. Next question, please.

OPERATOR: Next question comes from the line of Carol Morello with *The Washington Post*.

QUESTION: Hello. You said that you will continue to try to give some priority to some of the most vulnerable people out there as – for resettlement. In the past, that has included LGBT people. Will that continue?

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL ONE: Yes, it will continue. If people are persecuted for members of a social group, including an LGBT group, then they're eligible for resettlement.

MODERATOR: Thank you. Last question, please.

OPERATOR: Last question comes from the line of Josh Gerstein with Politico. Please, go ahead.

QUESTION: Hi. I had two questions that are short answers, I think. Do you have a estimate for where we are or where you anticipate we'll be on refugee admissions for the FY 2017 cap by the end of this week or whenever you guys close off the reporting period?

And the new cap that you're proposing of 45,000, does that include this special group of asylum-seeking refugees from Australia that we had some prior diplomatic agreement with them about? Thank you.

US GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL ONE: So the first question – to answer the first question is it will be around 54,000. And the second question on – the

refugees on Nauru and Manus, yeah, it will include them.

MODERATOR: All right. Thanks, everybody, for calling in. As a reminder this call is embargoed until 5:00 p.m. Eastern Time today, and attribution is to senior U.S. Officials. Thank you so much.

[\[1\]](#) Section 207(d)(1) and (e) of the Immigration and Nationality Act

[\[2\]](#) 17,500

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