

Catholic agencies say arrival of refugees slowed by security measures

SueAnn Howell Catholic News Service | May. 17, 2011
Immigration and the Church

CHARLOTTE, N.C. -- The number of refugees taking shelter in the United States has slowed to a trickle following new security measures put in place by the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Meanwhile, Catholic refugee resettlement offices across the country are left waiting, uncertain when the flow of refugees will begin again -- and when it does, how many refugees may be allowed to enter the country.

Last year, the United States welcomed 75,417 refugees -- people escaping religious or political persecution, poverty, natural disasters and more.

The number is determined every year by the president in consultation with Congress; the slots are divided among different regions of the world. In October, President Barack Obama authorized 80,000 refugees be accepted during fiscal year 2011, which runs from October 2010 to September 2011.

Each year, the U.S. bishops' Migration and Refugee Services and its diocesan affiliates resettle between 27 percent and 28 percent of the total number authorized to come to the United States, with other aid organizations helping the rest.

An MRS staffer in Washington told Catholic News Service May 16 that of 80,000 authorized for entry this year, the agency and its diocesan affiliates expected to resettle 23,358 refugees. But because of the slow down, only 38 percent of the number authorized by Obama have entered the United States.

Delays in the refugee resettlement process are being caused by a backlog of security clearances and additional security "holds," according to Larry Bartlett, acting director of the Office of Refugee Admissions for the State Department. The additional security measures are part of a larger series of security enhancements by the Homeland Security Department.

Agencies receive \$700 per person to help with the resettlement process, providing vital services from the point of picking them up at the airport to helping them get settled into American life. This reimbursement is awarded only for the refugees who actually arrive.

Simply put, no new refugees means reduced funding for the aid organizations -- and no reimbursement money to cover the expense of diocesan staff and services needed for refugees who are already here, until more refugees arrive.

The Diocese of Charlotte took in 192 men, women and children who came from Myanmar, Bhutan, Cuba, Vietnam, Eritrea, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan and Iran from October 2009 to March 2010. The diocese received \$134,400 from the federal government to provide direct services for those refugees. From October 2010 to March 2011, the diocese has resettled only 112 people, with reimbursements totaling \$78,400.

Cira Ponce, director of the Catholic Social Services Refugee Resettlement Office for the diocese, said she hasn't seen this level of security holdups since the 9/11 terrorist attacks. At that time, the federal government provided budget allowances to accommodate for the significant reduction in the number of refugees, so aid agencies could maintain the level of services still needed for refugees already in the United States.

Now, the changes in security clearances are raising concerns, Ponce told the Catholic News Herald, Charlotte's diocesan newspaper.

"The delays mean more than a bureaucratic inconvenience or a financial impact on dioceses," she said. "It means more people left stuck in refugee camps, facing illness and danger, and more families waiting to be reunited with loved ones already in this country. Many of them have already been waiting years to come to America."

"Some refugees are in camps and have been interviewed, cleared and are ready to travel," Ponce added. "They have had the necessary security checks, health screenings, etc. (With the new security measures) they are then put in another holding pattern."

If people are forced to wait too long, those screenings will expire and they'll have to get back in line before they can be resettled, she pointed out, which means even more delays for the refugees and for the Catholic agencies anxious to help them.

No one knows when the backlog may be cleared, and refugee resettlement staff members are concerned that when it does, a flood of refugees might overwhelm dioceses.

"While some of our sites are on target for arrivals, most have seen the impact of these new clearances with lower than projected arrivals," said Anastasia Brown, director of resettlement programs for MRS. "We are concerned that numbers have not yet increased in a way to meet the new projection. However, weekly allocations of refugees have improved, and we are hopeful this trend will continue."

The State Department's Bartlett said that he believed the resettlement process would be "back on track in May."

"In the last five months of the fiscal year, we'll be able to make up for some of the lost arrivals," Bartlett said. "Our goal will be to admit between 6,000 and 8,000 individuals per month in as steady a pace as possible. At this point, we do not expect to admit any more than 9,000 in the month of September, meaning that our admissions are likely to fall somewhere between 63,000 and 74,000 for the year."

In the meantime, diocesan staff members continue to prepare for the arrival of refugees, keeping communications open with volunteers, agencies and companies they work with to find homes, jobs, food assistance, education and health care for them.

"Although this is a hardship, we are hopeful. This is a ministry that has and will continue to be blessed by the generosity of our community and God's hand in our work. We are people of faith, and God guides us and answers our prayers," Ponce said.

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