

Biden to Welcome More Refugees, but Far From All Will Get In

Gutted by the Trump administration, the refugee resettlement system is unable to quickly process tens of thousands of the world's neediest people.



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Published Feb. 3, 2021 Updated March 18, 2021

WASHINGTON — President Biden's expected announcement on Thursday that he intends to allow more refugees into the United States this year will bring him face to face with a policy barrier left by his predecessor: a gutted resettlement system unable to quickly process the tens of thousands of desperate people whom Mr. Biden would like to let in.

Stripped of personnel and weakened by the coronavirus, the government's refugee program is simply not equipped to welcome a flood of foreigners fleeing disaster, officials and experts said.

President Donald J. Trump steadily lowered the annual cap on refugees from the 110,000 that President Barack Obama said should be allowed into the United States in 2016 to just 15,000 for the current fiscal year, a record low. Even that rock-bottom number overstates the cap, since the Trump administration added more barriers on the world's neediest people.

Beyond numbers, some refugee officers were reassigned from posts abroad, which had been shuttered. That left some applicants indefinitely waiting for interviews. Others were unable to travel during the pandemic as the backlog of persecuted immigrants seeking legal entry to the United States grew.

"Now you're left with a group that's grounded because of the virus and the numbers were slashed," said Jason Marks, a union steward for refugee and asylum officers in the Washington area. He said some had quit in recent years, refusing to be swept up in Mr. Trump's tough immigration limits at the southwestern border.

Although Congress has maintained a stable level of funding for the State Department's refugee program — more than \$3 billion annually since 2015 — a governmentwide effort to process and resettle people projected it had only \$814 million in available funds this year, a reflection of how few people were likely to be welcomed into the United States.

By the end of December, fewer than 1,000 refugees had been processed under the 15,000-person cap and placed in American communities, according to State Department data.

Mr. Biden is expected to address the issue of refugees during a speech at the State Department scheduled for Thursday. A senior official said Mr. Biden was poised to lift the cap to allow in tens of thousands more people before the end of the 2021 fiscal year in September, but it was unclear when the administration would announce the specific number.

Mr. Biden promised during the presidential campaign last year to allow as many as 125,000 refugees annually. Two people familiar with the plan said he was not expected to announce how many more refugees could enter the country in 2021. Instead, they said, the final total would be prorated over the eight remaining months of the fiscal year to welcome more people than Mr. Trump had authorized, but the number would ultimately fall short of 125,000.

Spokesmen for the White House, the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security declined to comment.

Given the dismal state of the refugee program, however, experts predicted that only a fraction of the people authorized in 2021 would be able to enter the United States by Sept. 30.

Citizenship and Immigration Services was funded for just 235 officers in the refugee corps in the fiscal year that ended on Oct. 1, compared with 352 in 2017, according to budget documents provided to Congress and obtained by The New York Times. Only 136 refugee officers were on staff as of Dec. 15, according to Michael Knowles, the president of AFGE Local 1924, which represents refugee officers. The Trump administration also severely limited referrals from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the agency that has historically elevated a number of applicants.

In the United States, 105 offices where refugees could seek help when transitioning to their new homes shuttered by April 2019, about one-third of such resettlement offices, according to a report from the Penn Biden Center that was released in October.

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Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, the chief executive of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, said 17 of the organization's 48 resettlement offices closed because of financial constraints from the cuts to refugee admissions.

"It was death by a thousand cuts," Ms. Vignarajah said.

In 2017, Mr. Trump's first year in office, he also terminated an Obama-era program allowing Central American children to remotely apply for protection to reunite with relatives in the United States. Mr. Biden aims to restore a version of the program, administration officials said.

Under a 1980 law, a president can change the refugee cap established for a current fiscal year if there is an unforeseen emergency or a necessary response to a grave humanitarian concern, or if it is otherwise in the national interest.

Barbara L. Strack, a former chief of the refugee affairs division at Citizenship and Immigration Services during the Bush and Obama administrations, told Congress last year that about 40,000 refugees had already been screened by the United States but were stuck in limbo.

The situation has only grown worse. The number of refugees around the world has steadily risen as war, oppression and humanitarian disasters drive people from their homes. The United Nations estimated that as of last summer, there were 26.3 million refugees worldwide, with more than two-thirds from five countries: Syria, Venezuela, Afghanistan, South Sudan and Myanmar.

Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken this week also raised the possibility of joining Britain in accepting refugees fleeing political repression in Hong Kong.

"We see people who are, again, in Hong Kong standing up for their own rights, the rights that they felt were guaranteed to them," Mr. Blinken told MSNBC. "If they're the victims of repression from Chinese authorities, we should do something to give them haven."

Ms. Strack said Mr. Biden was likely to cite a global need for resettling refugees and proclaim that "the United States will retake leadership here." But, she said, there was very little chance that the United States could accept all 125,000 refugees whom Mr. Biden is set to welcome.

Raising the cap from 15,000 will require additional funds and a wholesale repair of the system. The pandemic will also challenge the president's efforts; even families who were accepted last year had their flights canceled multiple times.

"The wild card for the moment, and next year, is Covid," Ms. Strack said, raising the possibility that the virus would hinder operations for overseas resettlement agencies.

But she said she supported Mr. Biden's intentions, saying the effort early in his first year "sends the concrete signal to all the operational players that they need to start gearing up."

The annual limit on the number of refugees allowed to resettle in the United States usually changes based on what a presidential administration deems necessary to meet the world's needs. Mr. Trump, however, saw the refugee program as part of his broader effort to keep foreigners out of the United States.

Under his administration, the United States resettled even fewer refugees than it ostensibly allowed under its annually shrinking caps.

In 2016, the last full fiscal year of the Obama administration, the United States admitted 84,994 refugees allowed under its 85,000 cap — a 17-year high, according to data provided by the State Department.

In 2018, the United States resettled 22,517 refugees under a cap of 45,000. Two years later, in 2020, the limit had dipped to 18,000 refugees, but 11,814 were admitted.

"Vetting refugees takes a long time," said Sarah Pierce, a policy analyst at the Migration Policy Institute. "And refugee resettlement is not as welcoming as it was."

Correction: Feb. 3, 2021

Because of an editing error, an earlier version of this article misstated that Barbara L. Strack, a former chief of the refugee affairs division at Citizenship and Immigration Services, said President Biden was unlikely to cite a global need for resettling refugees. She said it was likely the president would cite such a need.

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 15 of the New York edition with the headline: Gutted System Will Test Biden Vow to Welcome More of World's Needy