

## **PLEA: HELP IRAQIS FLEE; RESETTLE REFUGEES, IRAQI-AMERICANS IN BAY AREA URGE**

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### **Body**

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**Bay Area Iraqi-Americans** are weighing in on an international humanitarian call to allow more Iraqi **refugees** to enter the United States, as violence in war-torn Iraq has forced 2 million to **flee** to neighboring countries.

**Bay Area** residents who want to bring relatives from Iraq said the lobbying to expand programs to **resettle** Iraqi **refugees**, particularly those who have **helped** U.S. military operations, is long needed.

"I'm overwhelmed and delighted," said Nathera Maula, a San Jose Realtor who immigrated from Iraq 43 years ago. "People there have been suffering, and it seems like it's way overdue."

Maula's brother, Amir Hadid, a San Jose physician, called the new effort "fantastic," because it offers hope to many **Iraqi-Americans**. Hadid said he wants to bring his nieces here from the horrors of Baghdad.

One brother is now in Jordan with his family; another brother has immigrated to England so his sons could avoid the draft for Saddam Hussein's army.

"It's a mess," Hadid said. "It's like a curse to be an Iraqi person."

Like his family, many **Iraqis** would prefer to stay in their country, Hadid said. But the war leaves them without a choice.

"It's just they want to have security," Hadid said. "Who wants to die while you're shopping for bread?"

Since the American invasion of Iraq three years ago, 466 Iraqi **refugees** have been **resettled** in the United States, Ellen Sauerbrey, assistant secretary of state, told a Senate committee hearing on Iraqi **refugees** Tuesday.

Last week, international organizations **urged** the U.S. government and the European Union to make resettlement of Iraqi **refugees** a priority because the continuing flight of **Iraqis** has made it a "crisis of historic proportions."

Resettlement groups like the International Rescue Committee, the U.S. Committee for **Refugees** and Immigrants, and the Catholic Charities of Santa Clara County **urged** the federal government to allow religious minorities who have become targets of sectarian violence in the war to immigrate. Those groups also **urged refugee** status for those who have relatives in the United States, and **Iraqis** who have worked with the U.S. military.

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Sauerbrey told legislators that although resettlement of Iraqi refugees is "a top priority," the federal government has not funded the program. What's more, many Iraqi refugees who have been waiting for years to be resettled, and to join relatives in San Jose, are tied up in lengthy security screening.

"It's heartening that there's a level of concern and interest," said Bob Carey, vice president for resettlement with the International Rescue Committee. IRC in San Francisco resettled hundreds of Iraqi refugees from the Persian Gulf War who are now scattered across the Bay Area.

"But the question is how that translates into action and quick action," Carey said. "Speed is critical here. People are at risk now."

The Bush administration has failed to act promptly to resettle Iraqi refugees, critics said, because it may suggest that the war in Iraq failed.

"We've not created a channel, a mechanism" to bring the most vulnerable Iraqi refugees, said Ellen Dumesnil, division director at Catholic Charities in San Jose.

But the United States, she said, has capacity to respond to the Iraqi refugee crisis in the same humanitarian spirit as the resettlement of Vietnamese refugees in the 1970s and 1980s.

"That's in line with our country's traditions," said Vic Zikoor, 60, a San Jose civil engineer who immigrated from Iraq in 1979.

"I feel very sad that Iraqis, specially the professionals, the brains of the country, are having to leave a country with lots of resources and potential," Zikoor said. "If you were forced to leave your country and live in China, how would you feel?"

George Zaia, a contract manufacturer in Milpitas, said he also supports the effort to resettle refugees. He has cousins in Baghdad.

"They can't go anywhere; they can't do anything," Zaia said. "I'm trying to bring them over here, but I don't know how."

Many Iraqi-Americans agree that ending the war and bringing security in Iraq are paramount, but some said resettling refugees out of terrible conditions in Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and Turkey, where millions of Iraqi refugees have fled, is a must.

"This isn't just a question of refugees," said Emad Yahya, a San Jose engineer. "What we need to do is look at why this is happening and are we going to allow this to continue?"

"I hate to sound cold and non-compassionate," Yahya said. "My wife's sister is sitting in Jordan, and they've applied for refugee status in the United States."

"It's been five years," he said. "In this situation, you have to put logic and not just your heart into it."

The U.S. Committee for Refugees and Immigrants, a national non-profit group based in Washington, D.C., is holding a fundraising event to raise awareness about Iraqi refugees Jan. 31 at the Rockit Room, 406 Clement St., San Francisco. Suggested donation is \$20. The New York Times contributed to this story.

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