FAQ: Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for Fiscal Year 2021

Federal law requires that every year before October 1, the beginning of the federal fiscal year (FY), the President and his Administration consult with Congress and set and formally sign the Presidential Determination (PD) on Refugee Admissions, the annual refugee admission goal for the coming FY. The refugees who are allowed to come go through rigorous security and health screening overseas, often taking eighteen months or more to complete the process. The Administration issued a Report to Congress and on October 27, 2020 the President formally signed the PD Memorandum.

How many refugees are authorized to be admitted to the U.S. in 2021?
Up to 15,000 refugees may be admitted, including 6,000 who would have come in FY 2021 but for COVID-19.

Which overseas refugees are authorized for admission?
Refugees authorized to be admitted to the United States include:

1. 5,000 refugees who have been persecuted or fear they will be persecuted because of their religion, including some designated religious minorities;
2. 4,000 refugees from Iraq who were allies of the U.S. mission in Iraq and therefore are in danger;
3. 1,000 refugees from Honduras, Guatemala, or El Salvador;
4. 5,000 “other” refugees including those referred by U.S. embassies, those admitted through the following-to-join or P-3 family reunification processes, a group of refugees referred to us by Australia, refugees from Hong Kong, Venezuela, or Cuba, and refugees who had been ready to depart to the United States as of September 30, 2019.
How does this number compare to past years?

This Administration’s four PDs have been successively all-time low refugee admission goals: 45,000 (2018), 30,000 (2019), 18,000 (2020), and now 15,000. Prior to this Administration, the average annual PD over the four decades of the refugee program has been 95,000. Regarding the categories of refugees authorized for admission in previous Administrations, allocations were made by global regional need, instead of areas of geo-political importance to the Administration.

How does this year’s Presidential Determination affect refugees fleeing religious persecution?

In testimony to Congress, the former Chief of the U.S. Refugee Affairs Division at the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) noted that the Administration’s 5,000 slots for refugees fleeing religious persecution represents a “sharp dip”, noting that with the average 95,000 goal and regional categories, as many as 15,000 such refugees would be admitted in a year.

In fact, Closed Doors, a human rights report by Evangelical Christians, documents a downturn in the U.S. commitment by the Trump Administration to refugees fleeing religious persecution.¹ Since 2015, there has been an 89.7% decrease in the resettlement of Christians from the top 50 countries perpetuating religious persecution, including a 97.1% decrease in the number of Iranian Christians, a 94.5% decrease in Iraqi Christians, and a 93.7% decrease in the number of Christians from Burma.² The report also notes a disturbing reduction in resettlement of refugees of other faiths: a 100% decrease in the number of Jews resettled from Iraq and Iran, a 92% reduction in the of Yazidis from Iraq, and a 95% decrease of Muslims from Burma (mostly Rohingyas).³

Is the Administration likely to meet the FY 2021 refugee admission goal?

There are serious concerns that the Administration will not even meet its all-time low goal. This is because of the very restrictive way that the FY21 “other” category appears to be devised and interpreted, and the major processing delays that are expected to again lead to a large shortfall in the Iraqi category (only 161 of 4,000 authorized Iraqis arrived last year). Also, it appears that with the restrictive “other” category, thousands of refugees will be cut off from access to the U.S. resettlement program, refugees who have already been accepted for processing and gone through long months, if not years of U.S. processing.

What is the Catholic Church’s teaching on welcoming refugees?

Jesus calls us to welcome the newcomer, and care for those in need. Pope Francis urges us to follow that call to welcome, protect, promote, and integrate refugees. While every refugee is precious and welcomed, with such small admission numbers, thousands of refugees are left in harm’s way and many are separated from and unable to reunify with their families.

What is a consequence of such a low number of refugees being allowed to come?

Many note that with such small refugee admissions, communities miss out on the contributions that refugees provide. During COVID-19, those who came as refugee newcomers soon have become contributing members of our communities. Studies show refugees in the frontlines as U.S. essential workers, with over 176,000 refugees health care workers and over 175,000 working in the food supply chain.
The U.S. is accepting less refugees in the last few years and the Administration says that it is related to the large number of asylum seekers coming to the U.S. Have we always grouped these two populations, refugees and asylum-seekers, together?

Traditionally asylum seekers and refugees have been separated with different processing and legal requirements. Last year’s Presidential Determination was the first time the two distinct protection systems for refugees and asylum-seekers have been conflated (See JFI Background: Difference between refugees and asylees).

Do we have capacity to resettle more refugees?

There is greater capacity to resettle refugees, as seen in the forty-year history during which the average PD was 95,000.

What are USCCB’s recommendation regarding refugee resettlement?

- Build back the program to historic norms of 95,000 per year.
- Ensure that technical, operational and policy adjustments are made so that the actual refugee arrivals in FY2021 meet the overall goal of the PD.
- Do not cut off access to resettlement and leave behind refugees who have already been accepted to go through U.S. refugee resettlement processing.

Endnotes

2 Ibid.