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U.S. ORDERS SLOWDOWN OF REFUGEE RESETTLEMENTS

State Department slows work on cases involving refugee travel to the U.S. scheduled for after March 3

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The U.S. State Department has ordered embassies to slow resettlement of refugees for the next few weeks and delay booking travel for refugees after March 3 as the numbers approach the annual cap of 50,000 set recently by President Donald Trump, according to American officials.

U.S. officials from embassies in the Middle East said they received a directive Tuesday from the State Department's Population, Refugee and Migration bureau to delay booking travel to the U.S. for refugees awaiting final resettlement after March 3. The directive said the numbers of refugees already admitted is close to Mr. Trump's cap for 2017.

A Jan. 27 executive order from Mr. Trump temporarily suspended all immigration and travel to the U.S. for citizens of seven predominantly Muslim nations – an action the administration said was necessary to thwart terrorist attacks. It also suspended all refugee admissions for 120 days and indefinitely barred Syrian refugees.

The same order also cut the annual limit for refugees for the year ending October 2017 to less than half of the previous administration's 110,000 ceiling.

Provisions within the executive order – such as the suspension of the refugee program and the travel and immigration bans – are being challenged in U.S. courts. Last week, a federal-appeals court ruling stayed parts of the executive order, lifting the immigration and travel bans and restarting the flow of refugees.

But the court ruling didn't affect the 50,000 limit on refugees set out in the order, a State Department spokeswoman said. State Department officials said the refugee cap imposed by Mr. Trump is legal and isn't being challenged as the constitution allows the president to set admissions numbers for refugees each year.

"In support of the president's executive order, the department is preparing to reduce the number of weekly refugee arrivals such that we will admit no more than 50,000 refugees by the end of the fiscal year," the spokeswoman said.

Some 35,000 refugees have already been admitted for the government's 2017 fiscal year that ends in October, according to State Department figures. That leaves 15,000 slots open for the next 7-½ months.

In the immediate aftermath of the executive order, thousands of refugees, immigrants and travelers who had been approved to enter the U.S. were stranded at airports abroad, unable to board U.S.-bound flights or denied entry after landing on American soil.

With the government's 2017 fiscal year falling partly under former President Barack Obama's administration, State Department officials had about three months to approve applications under the old cap of 110,000 until Mr. Trump halved admissions in January.

"There were a lot of people stranded with the first executive order who were up for resettlement," but their paperwork has now been delayed, said a U.S. embassy employee in the Middle East. The official added that the State Department directive told embassies not to arrange flights beyond March 3 for refugees until the State Department can determine which applicants will be given the remaining resettlement slots.

"For those that don't make the 15,000 cut, they are out of luck until the next fiscal year," he said.

As the refugee program reaches its ceiling, many of those stranded because of the first executive order and rescheduled to be resettled in the U.S. in the coming weeks may be disappointed again. Those who don't get resettled this year will have to restart much of the process – including long, complicated security checks – to reapply for fiscal year 2018. And they could see even fewer slots available for refugee resettlement next year depending on where Mr. Trump caps the program.

By lowering the ceiling, Mr. Trump's plans to take in more Christian refugees also will be affected, with tens of thousands of applications vying for 15,000 available places. Mr. Trump had defended his executive order partly by stating the U.S. should take in more Christian refugees.

"They were working under assumption of 110,000 refugees to be let in under Obama so they were working at a faster pace but then found out that the number would be less than half that. That's why we're seeing the scaling back now," said Bill Frelick, Human Rights Watch's director for refugee rights.

"But the implication on the ground is that if the concern is to protect Christian refugees, the cut is impacting the people – including Christians – who are well into the process and the pipeline. So, if you're cutting the number by more than half, then you're cutting a lot of Christians and other minorities out of resettlement as well."

The Justice Department on Thursday told an appeals court there was no reason to reconsider a case on Mr. Trump's executive order, a move that came as Mr. Trump announced he would issue a new order next week. The department's filing came in the San Francisco-based Ninth U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, where a three-judge panel last week ruled the executive order couldn't be implemented because it went too far in limiting travelers to the U.S.

– *Ben Kesling in Erbil, Iraq contributed to this article.*