

Iraqi refugees' families must wait, worry

by Leslie Berestein

SAN DIEGO - Nadia Keilani's relatives began fleeing their homes in Iraq last summer, bound for Syria. Little by little, an uncle, two aunts, several cousins and their children have trickled into the capital city of Damascus, taking shelter in a slum that has become known as the Iraqi refugee ghetto.

REFUGEES - Nadia Keilani held a plate depicting a darfash, a cloth-draped cross with olive branches, which is a symbol of her faith. Photo by Charlie Neuman.

Keilani, 34, a San Diego attorney, visited her uncle's family there in July. She stood in line in the heat with them for hours outside a United Nations office as they attempted to apply for refugee status.

Like many Iraqi-Americans, Keilani and her parents, who also live in San Diego, would like to bring their relatives to the United States. But that isn't likely, at least at the moment.

After admitting only a handful of Iraqi refugees in recent years, the U.S. State Department announced last month that an additional 7,000 Iraqis would be accepted as refugees this year. With millions displaced by sectarian violence - including an estimated 2 million who have fled to neighboring countries - the news is cold comfort to many families who fear that their relatives will not be among the lucky few.

Iraqi immigrant organizations in San Diego and elsewhere that have lobbied for the admittance of more refugees say they are grateful for the allowance, considering that as of last Sept. 30, only 645 Iraqi refugees had been admitted since the war began four years ago, with 202 coming in last year. They are disappointed the numbers aren't higher.

Those with relatives appealing to them for help feel frustrated.

"Everyone has a family member that they would like to bring, because it has become completely

unbearable," said Keilani, who left Iraq with her parents in 1981. "You talk to a family member and they tell you, 'I have not set foot outside my home for three weeks because I'm in fear of being killed.' And what can you do for them?"

REFUGEE ALLOWANCE

Priority for the additional slots will be given to Iraqis who have worked with the U.S. government, a State Department spokesman said, and it is unclear how many of those individuals will be in line.

The recent allowance represents the federal government's expectation of how many Iraqi refugees will need resettlement, at least for now, said Peter Eisenhauer, a spokesman for the department's Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration.

"That there are 2 million out of the country does not tell you immediately that there are 2 million people who are in refugee status that need protection, or that they are in a situation where they need to be permanently resettled to a third country," Eisenhauer said.

The goal of the Bush administration is to create stability in Iraq so that most of those who have fled may return safely, he said.

Given the daily chaos, this seems like a pipe dream to some Iraqi immigrants, who criticize the administration of President Bush for all but closing its doors to a humanitarian crisis they see as a byproduct of the war.

"The United States should not shrink from accepting responsibility, and not only accepting responsibility, but

being humanitarian," said Bishop Sarhad Yawsip Jammo of St. Peter's Chaldean Cathedral in El Cajon, Calif. "It is a result of our actions in Iraq."

BIG IRAQI COMMUNITIES

The San Diego and Detroit areas are home to the nation's largest Iraqi immigrant communities. The majority in San Diego are Chaldeans, a Christian minority. As many as 30,000 Iraqi Chaldeans live in San Diego County.

Chaldean organizations in the United States have been especially vocal about the refugee crisis, with groups lobbying Congress to let in more Iraqis.

While refugees of all religious and ethnic identities have fled Iraq, or been displaced within the country by violence, religious minorities see themselves as particularly vulnerable in light of growing Islamic fundamentalism.

Radical militias routinely target the homes of Christians, advising them to evacuate immediately or face execution, said Joseph Kassab, director of the Chaldean American Federation in Farmington Hills, Mich. They are forced to leave with nothing, Kassab said.

"The Christians are the weakest of the weak," Kassab said. "They don't have militias to protect them, unlike their other Iraqi brothers, the Sunnis or the Shiites."

Keilani and her relatives belong to an even smaller religious minority, the Mandaean. An ancient sect of followers of John the Baptist, they are neither Christian, Muslim nor Jewish.

Like the Chaldeans, many Mandaeans owned liquor stores or jewelry stores in Iraq, lucrative businesses that made them prime targets for kidnapers.

During her visit to Damascus last summer, Keilani was shocked by what she saw in a slum where most Iraqi refugees have settled. With little work available, survival is a struggle.

"A lot of women are resorting to prostitution," she said. "They are panhandling, becoming homeless. You will see entire Iraqi families sleeping on blankets on the sidewalk."

She and her family are looking into getting their relatives to other countries accepting Iraqi refugees, such as Australia or Canada.

"These are our families, and we are seeing them barely able to survive and without a future," Keilani said. "It is very tragic, and there is nothing we can do."

ROUTE THROUGH MEXICO

The State Department has proposed accepting a maximum of 70,000 refugees in fiscal 2007, with the greatest number coming from African countries. Last year, 10,357 refugees were admitted from Somalia. Eisenhauer, of the State Department, said that while 7,000 Iraqi refugee referrals are expected this year, more could be admitted in the future.

Since 1975, more than 37,000 Iraqis have been admitted to the United States, he said. Admissions of Iraqis slowed because of security measures after Sept. 11, 2001.

In addition, Eisenhower said, many returned home after the fall of Saddam Hussein's government.

Meanwhile, some of the exodus has made its way to the U.S.-Mexico border, where customs inspectors for several years have encountered Iraqis who seek asylum after having been smuggled through Mexico.

Since Oct. 1, 118 Iraqis have shown up at California ports of entry, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection, compared with 115 for all of fiscal 2006, and 75 for 2005.

Dr. Noori Barka, head of the San Diego-based Chaldean American Foundation, said one reason he supports admitting more refugees is to prevent Iraqis from resorting to smugglers.

"We are trying to stop the process of them coming through Mexico," Barka said. "It is not a healthy situation."

Not all Iraqi immigrants see allowing in more refugees as a solution. Imam Husham Al-Husainy, the Shiite head of the Karbalaa Islamic Center in Dearborn, Mich., said he would prefer to see the U.S. and Iraqi governments restore stability.

"Creating a better security environment is much better than taking the Iraqis out of Iraq and locating them around the world," Al-Husainy said.

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