

Court ruling could slow refugee arrivals in Northwest Arkansas

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John Wider holds up a sign welcoming Muslims in the Tom Bradley International Terminal at Los Angeles International Airport. A scaled-back version of President Donald Trump's travel ban took effect Thursday evening, stripped of provisions that brought protests and chaos at airports worldwide in January yet still likely to generate a new round of court fights.

Majidi Shabani once lived in a small village on the shore of Lake Tanganyika, a 400-mile-long strip of water in south-central Africa. He was 19 when militiamen broke into his house and killed his father, forcing Shabani to flee alone to a refugee camp a thousand miles to the south.

Seventeen years later, Shabani doesn't know if his mother survived or is still alive. But he and his wife and children are living a different kind of life in Fayetteville. He works as a cashier, his wife works at a daycare, and they have an idea to start a shoe business.

"It is a quiet place and peaceful place," he said Thursday. "I think we are coping. I'm so happy to be here."

The on-again, off-again flow of refugees such as Shabani to Northwest Arkansas will likely slow in the coming months, said Emily Linn, resettlement director for the refugee-focused nonprofit Canopy Northwest Arkansas.

Canopy since last fall has helped 42 people fleeing violence and persecution resettle in Fayetteville amid a nationwide court dispute over the Trump administration's efforts to pause the refugee program and cap its yearly size, Linn said. The U.S. Supreme Court last week decided those limits could partially stand until it reviews their legality in October.

What that means for refugees depends on their particular situations, according to the U.S. State Department and Linn.

For example, a large family from the Democratic Republic of the Congo in central Africa will still travel here this week because their plane tickets were already booked. Shabani is from the same country, where millions have died during decades of battle, starvation and disease, according to the United Nations World Food Programme.

But other relatives who were supposed to follow the family later, along with other refugees, could be barred for months because of the timing of their trips and other factors.

"We'll just stay tuned, and hopefully this all shakes out to be OK," Linn said.

Legal fight

Almost 23 million refugees around the world have fled religious, ethnic and political violence in Syria and dozens of other countries, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

President Donald Trump and other Republicans have said refugees pose a national security risk, pointing to attacks such as the one in Paris in November, which killed 130 and was carried out by European citizens linked to the Islamic State terror group in Syria and Iraq.

Trump early this year ordered a 120-day pause to refugee admissions, a similar halt to any travel from several countries and a yearly limit of 50,000 refugees, down from 85,000 last year. He said he would use the time to review and improve the vetting process of refugees by the Department of Homeland Security and other agencies.

"As president, I cannot allow people into our country who want to do us harm," Trump said in a statement after the Supreme Court decision. "I want people who can love the United States and all of its citizens, and who will be hardworking and productive."

No refugee has killed an American in a terrorist attack since the vetting system was put in place in the 1970s, according to the libertarian-leaning Cato Institute. But former Federal Bureau of Investigation director James Comey last year said "there's no risk-free process" because agencies don't have information on every refugee candidate.

Several states sued the administration, claiming the limits, particularly the one affecting certain countries, harmed universities and other institutions and were inspired by prejudice toward Islam. Several courts have agreed, pointing to Trump's own statements about Muslims, or have found other legal flaws in the orders.

Through it all, refugees have continued arriving in Northwest Arkansas in fits and starts, taking English and work classes, enrolling their kids in school and finding jobs, Linn said. One recently earned his driver's license and got hired as a mechanic.

The federal government pays Canopy for three months to help families become self-supporting. All have succeeded, Linn said, praising the volunteer teams that help each family and the broader community for its support.

'A joyful day'

Shabani and his family were among the first to come, arriving a few days before Christmas.

Shabani spent most of the past 17 years in a refugee camp in Namibia, near Africa's southern end. He worked occasionally in the country's capital as a teacher and Arabic translator, but generally couldn't leave the camp.

Applying for more stable resettlement in another country meant years of hourslong interviews, referrals from one agency to another and more interviews to double-, triple-, quadruple-check his story and other details.

"Pending, pending, pending," Shabani was told.

The final interview came last summer, when the U.S., Canada and Australia were considering his case. Sometime later Shabani's family was about to eat breakfast when he checked their status online. The U.S. had approved the application. That breakfast went uneaten.

"Is it really what I'm seeing here? No!" Shabani said in disbelief, as he recalled Thursday with a big smile. "It was a joyful day."

The flipping of the seasons from the Southern Hemisphere took some getting used to, but Shabani said Namibia's capital is similar to Northwest Arkansas, hilly and roughly equal in population.

He's interviewing for a job at the Fort Smith Islamic Center and would move there if he gets it, he said. But he said Canopy and its team of volunteers have been loving, caring companions for his family. About a dozen greeted them at the airport in December, and volunteers typically help furnish apartments and get families to all of their appointments.

The wait

The Supreme Court has final review in the legal controversy over refugees. It said last week the Trump administration limits could stand for the next few months for travelers and migrants who don't have "bona fide" connections to people and groups in the U.S.

The State Department later said people already booked to travel and those with parents, children, siblings and spouses in the country can still come in. Being assigned to a refugee agency such as Canopy isn't enough on its own, officials told reporters Thursday.

Linn said that means many refugees will likely be barred for now. A handful will continue to come to Northwest Arkansas under a program allowing Central American children fleeing gang violence to reunite with family members who immigrated legally to the U.S.

"The uncertainty's been unfortunate," Linn said, noting cancelled travel plans mean cancelled deposits for apartments and other troubles for Canopy.

Third District Rep. Steve Womack, a Republican from Rogers, and two other state congressmen last year wrote a letter to the State Department opposing the resettlement of refugees in Arkansas, citing concerns with the vetting process. Beau Walker, Womack's chief of staff, said Womack is "still very concerned" with that process.

If the government could guarantee all refugees' backgrounds are fully vetted, "that would help the situation," Walker said.