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Trump crackdown on refugees hits home for Somali community

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Jeylani Abdi Mohamed has spent most of his years as an American working to win approval for his mother's move to the United States.

And he thought it was about to happen – until the news leaked this week about an impending executive order from President Donald J. Trump that would bar refugees from his native Somalia and six other Muslim countries.

“It was really devastating” to hear the news, said Mohamed, 27, who moved to America as a refugee a decade ago. “But I understand the reason he did it.”

Trump spent much of his presidential campaign promising to crack down on the threat he saw coming from Muslim refugees.

His draft executive order -- which circulated widely this week among agencies that work with refugees -- would keep that promise.

The president's order would freeze all refugee resettlement for 120 days and bar the issuance of visas to people from Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen.

It would also institute an “extreme vetting” process toughening the rigorous security screenings that refugees already face, and cut the number of refugees admitted to the United States in fiscal 2017 from 110,000 – former President Barack Obama's goal – to 50,000.

In the draft order, Trump said he is forcing the changes in the refugee admission program “to protect the American people from terrorist attacks by foreign nationals admitted to the United States.”

According to research from the Cato Institute, a libertarian organization, there are relatively few such attacks. Of the 3.25 million refugees admitted into the United States since 1975, 20 became terrorists, resulting in the deaths of three Americans, according to the group. “The chance of being murdered in a terrorist attack committed by a refugee is one in 3.64 billion a year,” the Cato Institute said.

In contrast, Forbes reported last year that the odds of winning a Powerball jackpot are 1 in 292.2 million – meaning the average Powerball player is 12.46 times more likely to win the Powerball than he is to be killed by a refugee terrorist.

A Somali refugee wounded nine people in a stabbing rampage at a Minnesota mall last fall, and another Somali injured nine people in an attack at Ohio State University a few weeks later.

Given that history, Mohamed understood why Trump plans on cracking down on refugees.

“If he feels he has to do this to make America 100 percent safe, I understand,” he said. “If you have one bad tomato in the bunch, it’s going to affect all the good tomatoes.”

Still, people who work with Buffalo’s large refugee communities don’t understand what Trump is doing.

“These heartless actions will not make our country safer,” said Dr. Myron Glick, founder and director of Jericho Road Community Health Center.

“This is setting up a situation where people might think Muslims are terrorists” when the vast majority are not, Glick added. “That gives cover for people to do bad things.”

Trump’s potential order is expected to have huge ramifications not just for families like Mohamed’s, but for cities such as Buffalo.

While its largest number of refugees came from Burma in the past 15 years, Buffalo also welcomed 4,848 refugees from the countries whose outcasts would be banned under the Trump order.

Most notably, a sizable Somali community has developed on the West Side, as 2,735 newcomers have arrived from that strife-torn African nation.

“We didn’t cause any kind of trouble,” said Imam Yahye Omar of the Buffalo Islamic Community Center. “We are American citizens who didn’t do anything wrong.”

What’s more, refugees from Somalia and elsewhere have contributed greatly to the stabilization of Buffalo’s population and its economic rebound, said Eva M. Hassett, executive director of the International Institute of Buffalo, one of four agencies in the city that resettle refugees.

Trump’s four-month hold on refugee resettlement, along with his dramatic cut in the number of refugees to be admitted to the United States this year, will result in fewer newcomers moving to Buffalo, she said.

Agencies such as the International Institute get federal funds to resettle refugees, and most of the people end up working not long after moving to America. So Trump’s move could mean less federal money coming to Buffalo, along with fewer hard-working newcomers, Hassett said.

“Certainly this has the potential to have a negative economic impact,” she said.

It will have a negative effect on Mohamed, who became a U.S. citizen five years ago in hopes that it would help his mother's case for resettlement. Mohamed now holds an associate's degree and a job at Buffalo Wire Works, and has a wife and three young children.

Now 58, his mother, Suban Dhoore Oday, remains stranded in a refugee camp in Kenya. She suffers from high blood pressure.

"She's getting older, and I want her to come live with us," said Mohamed.

Mohamed's mother didn't get the United Nations card she needed to resettle in America when her husband and her nine children got approval to come to the U.S. a decade ago.

So she stayed behind, telling her children to go to America.

"She said: 'You're young; you can have a bright future there,'" Mohamed said.