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Catholic Leaders: Refugee Ban Harms US National Security

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Rather than protecting U.S. interests, recent executive orders restricting immigrants and refugees could actually pose a threat to national security, warned a group of Catholic leaders on Wednesday.

“These refugees are victims of the same violence we are trying to protect ourselves from,” said Jill Marie Geschütz Bell, senior legislative specialist for Catholic Relief Services, criticizing what she called a “disproportionate security response.”

“It’s time to be the Good Samaritan,” she urged.

Geschütz Bell and other Catholic immigration and refugee leaders spoke at a Feb. 1 press conference in Washington, D.C., hosted by the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.

Don Kerwin, executive director for the Center for Migration Studies, contended that by limiting refugee protection, the United States would actually harm its security goals.

“Refugee protection actually advances and furthers security,” he said, because when refugees are left in unstable situations, terrorist organizations such as ISIS have a “potent” recruiting opportunity.

In addition, the executive orders may damage alliances – both present and future – with other nations, Kerwin said, echoing similar statements by former CIA director Michael Hayden.

During his first week in office, President Trump signed three executive orders addressing a range of issues concerning immigration, refugees, border enforcement and vetting of immigrants to the country.

One of the orders halts refugee admissions for 120 days – indefinitely for Syrian refugees – and temporarily bans visa permissions for people seeking entry to the United States from Iraq, Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia and Yemen.

The effective travel ban quickly caused chaos at airports around the country as travelers already en route were told upon arrival that they would be sent back and would not be allowed into the United States for 90 days.

The same order also caps the number of refugees that will be allowed to enter the United States in 2017 at 50,000. In comparison, the 2016 cap was placed at 117,000 people, although only around 85,000 refugees actually entered the United States.

The executive action says that priority will be given to “refugee claims made by individuals on the basis of religious-based persecution” for members of minority faiths in the refugee’s country of origin.

While the order does not mention Christianity, Trump has told media such as Christian Broadcasting News that the order would prioritize Christian refugees.

President Trump said the ban was put in place to stop “radical Islamic terrorists” and to allow time for agencies to develop stricter screening programs for those coming into the country.

Two other orders the same week focused on addressing undocumented migrants already in the country and increasing border security. They included plans to build a wall along the Mexican border, increase the detention and deportation of undocumented immigrants, and penalize jurisdictions that do not comply with federal immigration laws – called “sanctuary cities” – by withholding federal grants and other funds.

Kerwin argued that while the executive orders are framed as a matter of national security, in fact, the order “exaggerates the threat from refugees in the United States beyond recognition.”

He pointed to research by the Cato Institute, which found that between 1975 and 2015, the United States admitted 3.2 million refugees, and only three people have been killed by refugee attacks – a minuscule risk that also doesn’t fully incorporate new, more restrictive protections already in place, he said.

“The overall point is that refugees themselves do not threaten security, terrorists do, and the failure of states to address this crisis also undermines security,” Kerwin stated. “We’re facing not a refugee crisis, but a crisis in refugee protection, which the executive order makes far worse.”

“More broadly,” he continued, by stepping back, the United States might be providing a troubling example for other nations. “It’s really impossible to think how the greatest refugee crisis in history since WWII could be resolved without the US playing a leading role as it has in past refugee crises.”

Speakers at the press conference emphasized that current U.S. security vetting for refugees is already very strong, and while vetting concerns are always valid, the actions taken by the executive orders are disproportionate to the threat presented.

Jeanne Atkinson, executive director for the Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc., worried that the new orders would make Americans less safe by making immigrants less likely to report crimes for fear of deportation, thus allowing perpetrators to evade justice.

She also argued that the United States does not have the resources to carry through on the orders – there are simply not enough immigration officers and judges to review each of the 11 million cases in the country.

“What we’re going to see is the long-term detention of immigrants,” she warned. “People waiting for their day in court may languish in prison for years,” a move that she said will be costly to taxpayers and will violate the dignity of the persons detained.

Geschütz Bell added that the funds that will go into building a wall and hiring new border and immigration officers could instead be used to examine the root causes of migration. She pointed to Catholic Relief Service’s investment in and work with Honduran schools – work that undermines the gangs and resultant violence that has led people to flee Honduras in the first place.

Within three years, she said, the program has already had immense success in educating people and stabilizing the area. “Enabling people to thrive where they are is not only more humane, but it is a cheaper option for the American people.”

Bill Canny, executive director of Migration and Refugee Services for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, voiced hope that as time passes, implementation of the executive orders will become more “humane.” He noted that the Trump Administration has already agreed to allow in more than 8,000 people who have already left refugee areas, as well as Iraqis who have provided aid to the United States Military.

“We’re getting some indications of the humane implementation of the order,” he continued, and asked Catholics to use their influence to continue to push the administration towards more humane actions.

Geschütz Bell advocated for the humane protection of other vulnerable communities that need special consideration, such as female-headed households, children and people with medical needs.

At the root of the idea of humane treatment, added Sister Donna Markham O.P., president and CEO of Catholic Charities USA, is the understanding that refugees are human persons with dignity.

She urged Catholics to remember that “they are people like ourselves who woke up one morning and learned everything they had was destroyed,” and who feel depressed, downtrodden and rejected by those who turn them away in their time of distress.

“These are human beings like you and I.”