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## Trump's refugee actions reverberate in San Diego, a longtime hub for nation's new arrivals

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Emily Sifa Ngandu arrived in El Cajon less than three weeks ago. At age 22, the Congo native has spent most of her life in limbo — the past 17 years were in a refugee camp in Uganda — so her euphoria now is unmistakable.

“The people here are friendly,” she said with a broad smile. “They are so loving.”

People who work with refugees speak of a “honeymoon period,” when everything seems new and exciting. This usually lasts a few months.

For Ngandu, the honeymoon may be over. Ten days after she landed in the U.S., President Donald Trump signed an anti-terrorism executive order suspending refugee admissions while security procedures are reviewed.

“As young people, we come to the United States in order to pursue our dreams,” said Ngandu, who wants to be a lawyer or a journalist. “When we come here and hear that kind of news, it is kind of scary.”

Although Trump’s order was temporarily halted by a federal judge Friday, it adds to the fear and anxiety refugees have always carried with them to America, along with their hopes and dreams. Will they be able to stay? Can family members join them? If an emergency requires travel back to their homeland, can they get back into the U.S.?

These questions resonate deeply in San Diego County, where refugees have been a part of the community fabric since at least the 1910s, when Baja California residents fled the chaos of the Mexican Revolution. They were followed in the 1920s by Jews escaping European pogroms. World War II brought more refugees, as did Vietnam, and almost every wave of unrest sweeping the globe over the years has brought new arrivals to these shores.

The county took in 3,100 refugees last fiscal year, according to the state Department of Social Services, with the largest groups coming from war-torn Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan. Annually since 2009, the county has admitted more refugees than any other region in California, which accepts more refugees than any other state.

Trump's executive order, signed Jan. 27, suspends new refugees from anywhere in the world for 120 days, and those from Syria indefinitely. The directive also cuts the number of refugees allowed nationwide this fiscal year by more than half, from 110,000 to 50,000. And it bans for 90 days immigrants from seven Muslim-majority countries: Iraq, Iran, Syria, Yemen, Sudan, Libya and Somalia.

"In order to protect Americans," Trump said, "the United States must ensure that those admitted to this country do not bear hostile attitudes toward it and its founding principles."

Resettlement agencies say refugees already go through an extensive screening process that thwarts terrorists. The Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank in Washington, D.C., issued a report in September that said of the 3.25 million refugees who came to America from Jan. 1, 1975, through Dec. 31, 2015 — 41 years — 20 have been convicted of planning or committing an act of terrorism on U.S. soil.

The report calculated the annual odds of someone in the U.S. being killed in a terrorist attack by a foreign-born refugee at 1 in 3.64 billion.

#### Culture shock

San Diego has become a preferred destination for refugees for the same reason it's popular with others: the weather. But another factor is the variety of ethnic communities here, many of them started by earlier escapees.

"There are refugees here from everywhere," said Etleva Bejko, director of refugee and immigration services for Jewish Family Service of San Diego. "Having that mix creates the feeling that there is going to be a way for you to navigate the new country you are living in."

Navigation begins with one of four federally sanctioned resettlement agencies: Jewish Family Service, the International Rescue Committee, Catholic Charities and the Alliance for African Assistance. They provide everything from toothpaste to apartments.

On a recent weekday morning inside the City Heights offices of the Alliance for African Assistance, a classroom was packed with 30 people from Asia, Africa and the Middle East.

Kathryn Shade, a case worker, tells them that they can expect a small stipend from the federal government for about eight months.

"So after eight months," she asked, "will you have a job?"

"No," one of her Iraqi students replied, looking confused.

“No?” Shade said, raising an eyebrow.

“I am hoping so,” the Iraqi man said.

“Inshallah, right?” Shade said, smiling. “Inshallah, God willing.”

Having worked with hundreds of refugees, Shade finds that most undergo what she calls “the culture shock curve.” In the beginning, they are almost giddy with relief about finally reaching America.

But as they struggle to make ends meet in an expensive region and comprehend a new culture, many become anxious or depressed.

“These guys want to work right now,” Shade said, pointing to two young Middle Eastern men in the front row of the class. “But there’s not enough opportunity if you don’t speak English. You have to learn English like your life depends on it.”

Ahmed AL Zaidi took that advice to heart. A survivor of an ISIS attack that left him with a permanent limp, the 39-year-old Iraqi came to El Cajon in April and immediately enrolled in English classes. After 10 months here, “I feel I can live in America.”

He has a new job as an Amazon delivery driver. A dental laboratory assistant in Iraq, AL Zaidi understands that he’ll need more education and American credentials if he aspires to a middle-class life in San Diego County. Now, though, the roughly \$70 a day he earns driving is enough to pay his expenses.

The divorced father of four misses his children, who remain in Iraq, but he’s excited about the future. “America saved my life,” he said. “The United States is free. Free in culture, free in speech, free in education.”

#### War and terrorism

San Diego has been a haven for refugees since at least 1911. That’s when Mexican army units and rebels massed for a battle near Tecate, sending dozens of non-combatants fleeing north.

Refugee camps sprang up in Campo and in the countryside across the border from Tijuana and Tecate. The Red Cross in San Diego led a drive for tents, food and other items. “Everything that can be used in the shape of clothing and household goods will be needed,” The San Diego Union reported.

When the Mexican Revolution ended, the border region witnessed another wave of refugees, these fleeing religious persecution in Eastern Europe and Russia.

“Starting in the 1920s, more and more Jews wanted to get out of Europe because of the bad situation there,” said Joellyn Zollman, a historian and guest curator of “Celebrate San Diego! The History & Heritage of San Diego’s Jewish Community,” opening at the San Diego History Center on March 11.

“In the 1920s, a lot of Jews came to Tijuana, because they couldn’t get into San Diego and can’t get into the United States. But the Jewish community in San Diego helped them out,” Zollman said.

These European Jews were unable to enter the U.S. because of congressional immigration acts of 1917, 1921 and 1924. After World War II, though, the Truman Doctrine loosened restrictions to take in Holocaust survivors. Once again, foreign turmoil led to national policies with a local impact.

“San Diego’s Jewish community agreed to resettle up to one refugee family per month,” Zollman said. Between 1948 and 1953, about 75 families arrived.

The pattern was set. The president decides on each year’s quota, taking into account global events and American priorities. In 2002, the year after the 9/11 attacks, refugee admissions fell to under 27,000 nationwide, according to State Department data. In the last fiscal year, which ended Sept. 30, there were 84,995.

One small suitcase

A lot of the infrastructure in place to screen refugees before they come to the U.S. and then assist them when they get here started with the federal Refugee Act of 1980, which has its roots in the chaotic evacuation of thousands of Vietnamese after Saigon fell in 1975.

Camp Pendleton was the first of four tent cities set up in the U.S. to house Vietnamese refugees — the others were in Arkansas, Florida and Pennsylvania — and it happened in a hurry. “They basically had 24 hours to get ready for the first wave,” said Faye Jonason, the base’s museum director.

Refugees landed at the former El Toro air station in Orange County and were bused to Camp Pendleton, where they lived in Quonset huts and tents. Eventually there were eight separate camps and almost 1,000 tents. Areas were set up for meals, washing, clothes-distribution, health care, religious services. Babies were born at the camp. Couples got married, including a double wedding with two brothers.

From April through November 1975, about 50,000 refugees came to the camp, Jonason said, with the peak at any one time about 18,500. Some stayed for only a day until they were placed with sponsor families or relatives; others were there for months.

Thu Nguyen was 10 when she arrived with her five sisters, mother and grandfather. Her father was already in the U.S., studying at Syracuse University in New York. At the camp, all they had was one small suitcase each that they had been allowed to bring from Saigon — enough for two outfits, Nguyen said.

Now an executive with a bank in San Diego, she remembers how cold the Marine base was in the morning. How bewildering it was to be around Americans and realize that not everyone has dark hair and dark eyes. How odd the rice and soy sauce tasted. How worried she was about getting lost because every tent looked the same.

“I felt very confused,” she said. “People spoke a language I didn’t understand. I didn’t know where we were going to go.”

But she felt welcomed, too. The strangers were friendly. There were cartoons and movies, a playground and no school. “It was scary,” she said, “but a little bit fun at the same time.”

The family went to New York and was reunited with Nguyen’s father. His friends there made recordings of children’s songs — “On Top of Spaghetti,” “B-I-N-G-O”— to help them learn English, and they played them over and over.

Many of the refugees who came through Camp Pendleton stayed in Southern California, settling into “Little Saigon” neighborhoods in Linda Vista and City Heights and reshaping the region’s demographics and culture.

In 1970, the U.S. Census didn’t have a separate category for residents of Vietnamese descent. Today, more than 50,500 live in San Diego County.

70 nations a year

Scan the headlines for stories about turmoil abroad — civil war, “ethnic cleansing,” guerrilla uprisings, dissidents imprisoned or executed. Those countries are generating future waves of refugees.

“It’s where there are global hot spots,” said David Murphy, executive director of the International Rescue Committee in San Diego. “You’ll start to see refugees coming from those conflicts several years later. There’s a lag because they have to pass through security checks overseas.”

In the 1980s, eastern Africa — roiled by invasions, coups, political crackdowns — was a wellspring. First came the Eritreans, then the Somalis and Sudanese. A handful arrived first, followed by hundreds who were reassured that others had paved the way.

“But San Diego is a pretty expensive place to live and not a friendly place if you don’t have a lot of skills,” said Abdi Mohamoud, a Somali refugee who is now the executive director of Horn of Africa, a nonprofit in City Heights. Thousands headed to Minneapolis-St. Paul, taking jobs in meat-packing plants. That area now has the nation’s largest Somali population, which the U.S. Census Bureau in 2015 reported as 31,233. (San Diego County had 3,534.)

The recession, though, caused some Somalis to reconsider. “If I’m going to be unemployed,” Mohamoud heard them say, “why am I also freezing to death?”

The 1980s also saw an influx of Central Americans to San Diego. “Then in the ’90s, the Balkans blew up and we had a number of Bosnians,” said the International Rescue Committee’s Murphy. “African countries have had a fairly steady stream, and in the last 10 years it’s shifted a bit to the Middle East.”

More Iraqi refugees have come recently than any other ethnic group, with 1,120 in the last fiscal year and 426 in the first three months of this year, according to the county Health and Human Services Agency. The number of Syrians has risen sharply, from 17 in fiscal 2014 to 788 last year. So far this year, 214 Syrians have been admitted.

In a typical year, Murphy said, San Diego welcomes refugees from 70 nations.

‘Lost’ no more

In 2001, the wave of refugees that washed ashore in America carried 4,000 “Lost Boys” of Sudan, forced from their villages and families by civil war.

Alepho Deng, who lives now in El Cajon, was one of them. He and his brother and cousin were part of the Dinka tribe, farming and raising cows and goats. To escape the fighting, to avoid being conscripted, they spent about four years walking with 20,000 other boys — most younger than 10 — to safety in Ethiopia.

It was a journey of 1,000 miles, and more than half of them died — from starvation, thirst, wild animals, drowning, bullets in the crossfire of war.

At the refugee camp, Deng wondered where he might wind up. He thought back to a time before the civil war, when he was walking with his father and he noticed white streaks in the sky.

“There are these people, they’re called Americans, and they have these birds in the air,” his father told him.

Deng remembered thinking, “These must be superior beings to live in the air.”

When he arrived in San Diego, his amazement continued. He was given a place to live and food. “Wow,” he thought, “everything is free.” It took him about a year to “see what America is really like, that it’s entirely dependent on you to make your life what you want it to be.”

He and his brother and cousin wrote a memoir about their ordeal in Sudan, “They Poured Fire on Us From the Sky,” with San Diego author Judy Bernstein. Deng and Bernstein have a contract to write a sequel, about his resettlement here.

“I fled my country not because I wanted to, but because I had to if I wanted a peaceful life, a normal life,” Deng said. He still feels safe here, even after Trump’s executive order, especially when he compares it with what he went through to escape Sudan.

“When people start knocking on my door with a gun,” he said, “that will be a problem.”