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Biden lifts refugee cap to 62,500 — but admits “sad truth” that U.S. will take in far fewer

Igor Derysh

May 5, 2021

President Biden on Monday again reversed himself on the historically low refugee admissions cap set by former President Trump, while admitting but admitted that the number of refugees the country will take in this year will fall well short of the limit.

Biden quickly began to roll back parts of Trump's immigration policies in his first days in office, vowing to raise the refugee cap after his predecessor cut refugee admissions to historic lows. In February, his administration informed Congress that it would raise the number of refugee admissions for this fiscal year from Trump's 15,000 cap to 62,500. But weeks turned to months and Biden in April decided to keep Trump's refugee admissions limit, reportedly due to the "optics" stemming from the wholly unrelated rise in traffic at the U.S.-Mexico border. Biden reversed that position just hours later after widespread condemnation from Democrats and on Monday formally announced that he would raise the admissions limit after all.

"This erases the historically low number set by the previous administration of 15,000, which did not reflect America's values as a nation that welcomes and supports refugees," Biden said in a statement, adding, "It is important to take this action today to remove any lingering doubt in the minds of refugees around the world who have suffered so much, and who are anxiously waiting for their new lives to begin."

Biden touted the refugee resettlement program for its "commitment to protect the most vulnerable" and vowed to "rebuild what has been broken" under the previous administration. But Biden also admitted that the U.S. will not actually admit 62,500 refugees this fiscal year.

"The sad truth is that we will not achieve 62,500 admissions this year," the president said. "We are working quickly to undo the damage of the last four years. It will take some time, but that work is already underway. We have reopened the program to new refugees. And by changing the regional allocations last month, we have already increased the number of refugees ready for departure to the United States."

The statement came as the U.S. is on track to admit the fewest refugees in modern history. The country has admitted just over 2,300 refugees since the fiscal year began in October. It's unclear whether the new administration has taken any steps to address the concerns that prompted Biden to keep Trump's limit in place just two weeks ago, even as Secretary of State Antony Blinken, reportedly pleaded for the president to raise the cap. Biden has also kept in place a Trump-era pandemic rule that allows border officials to turn away migrants without giving them a chance to apply for asylum.

Still, Biden's turnabout announcement has been touted in the media and praised by many refugee groups.

Refugees International President Eric Schwartz called it a "proud and historic moment." Oxfam America's Noah Gottschalk said the move showed the Biden administration "kept its promise."

"We clearly lost 10 weeks of momentum here due to a political miscalculation, but we are elated the White House has put the train back on the tracks," Mark Hetfield, president and CEO of the refugee resettlement agency HIAS, told The New York Times.

Others argued that the move was more symbolic, given the delay in lifting the cap.

"The reality is that this is coming too late in the year to make a real impact," Alex Nowrasteh, director of immigration studies at the libertarian Cato Institute, told Voice of America. "Refugee agencies are so overburdened that we'll be lucky if one-quarter of the new 62,500 cap is filled this year."

Nowrasteh said the refugee resettlement system does not just need to be rebuilt. There is a "need for systematic reform, expansion and privatization of the refugee system," he said, "so that a future administration like Trump's won't have the ability to kill such an important program at the stroke of a pen."

Rep. Ilhan Omar, D-Minn., who came to the country as a refugee, said Biden's announcement was just the first step.

"We are now one step closer to welcoming Refugees, but not there yet," she said on Twitter. "Complacency is not how we get anything done, let's keep pushing and demanding more. The capacity is there and we must continue to create the will."

It's unclear how many refugees are likely to actually be admitted this year, or whether that number will surpass Trump's previous limit. Travel preparations are being made for more than 2,000 refugees who were excluded by the Trump administration, according to the Associated Press. About 35,000 refugees have been cleared to come to the United States, while another 100,000 are still in the pipeline.

The Biden administration has been evasive on questions about the program. Officials maintained that Biden remained committed to raising the admissions limit until he decided to keep Trump's cap in place, before quickly reversing that decision. Administration officials have argued that

increased refugee admissions could "overwhelm" the Department of Health and Human Services division that is dealing with an influx of unaccompanied minors at the U.S.-Mexico border, echoing the Trump administration's claims, according to the Times. But the same article noted that the administration has drawn complaints that it is "conflating two different immigration systems," since Health and Human Services plays a much smaller role in refugee admissions than do the State Department and Homeland Security.

A clear impediment to restoring the refugee resettlement program to its pre-Trump levels, when the U.S. admitted more than 84,000 refugees in 2016, is the damage done by Trump's cuts to resettlement agencies. More than 100 offices were shuttered and many employees let go as the administration slashed resources for the program.

"The way you rebuild capacity is by setting ambitious commitments that signal to domestic and international stakeholders that U.S. leadership is back," Nazanin Ash, the vice president for public policy and advocacy at the International Rescue Committee, told the AP.

"The new admissions ceiling reflects our core values as a welcoming nation, and finally aligns public policy with the unprecedented global need of millions forced from their home by violence, war, and persecution," Krish O'Mara Vignarajah, president of Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service, said in a statement.

Biden on Monday reiterated his goal to lift the admissions cap to 125,000 for the fiscal year beginning in October, but again acknowledged that the actual number of admissions may fall short of that goal.

"That goal will still be hard to hit. We might not make it the first year," Biden said. "But we are going to use every tool available to help these fully-vetted refugees fleeing horrific conditions in their home countries. This will reassert American leadership and American values when it comes to refugee admissions."