



Biden to Quadruple Refugee Cap

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WHITE HOUSE - U.S. President Joe Biden, who initially decided to keep intact his predecessor's historically low number of annual refugee admissions, Monday announced he is quadrupling this year's total.

"I am revising the United States' annual refugee admissions cap to 62,500 for this fiscal year," the president said in a statement Monday afternoon. "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. The new admissions cap will also reinforce efforts that are already under way to expand the United States' capacity to admit refugees, so that we can reach the goal of 125,000 refugee admissions that I intend to set for the coming fiscal year."

Two weeks ago, the White House announced that the cap for the current fiscal year would be kept at 15,000, the level set by former President Donald Trump. That announcement came despite Biden's promise that after his inauguration in January he would significantly expand the program. The move prompted a backlash from some of his fellow Democrats in Congress, as well as refugee advocates.

White House officials have acknowledged that the previous announcement, issued when opposition Republicans were criticizing Biden for an influx of migrants at the U.S. southern border, did not send the right message. Monday's announcement, they say, reinforces that admitting refugees is critical to America's place in the world.

"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," said Biden in his statement. "The sad truth is that we will not achieve 62,500 admissions this year. We are working quickly to undo the damage of the last four years. It will take some time, but that work is already under way."

Shortly after the president's announcement, Secretary of State Antony Blinken stated: "It is in our DNA as a nation to open our door to those seeking refuge, and it remains in our national interest to treat individuals applying for these programs fairly and with dignity and respect."

Refugees International President Eric P. Schwartz called it "a proud and historic moment." He added, "At a time of great humanitarian need, welcoming refugees is not only a moral imperative, but also promotes U.S. national security, bolsters our economy, enriches our

communities, and demonstrates that we're willing to work together with other governments on some of the world's most complex problems."

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

There is a "need for systematic reform, expansion and privatization of the refugee system 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," Nowrasteh told VOA.

Republican lawmaker Scott DesJarlais of Tennessee, a member of the House Armed Services Committee, noting Biden had committed last month to keeping Trump's cap in place, calls the president's decision to increase the number of refugees "a direct threat to our national security and public health safety."

The Republican Study Committee, the largest conservative caucus in the House of Representatives, objected to the move.

"During the highest influx of illegal immigration our country has seen in 20 years, @JoeBiden just raised the refugee cap over 400%. Let's be clear: this self-inflicted crisis is absolutely intentional," it posted on Twitter.

Trump, during his four years as president, had pared the size of the refugee program, which is distinct from the asylum system for migrants.

"The most powerful thing we can do as a country is to lead by example," said Andrew Albertson, executive director of Foreign Policy for America. "Today's announcement from President Biden makes it clear that the United States is ready to lead again."

The chairman of the Senate's foreign relations committee, Bob Menendez of New Jersey, said Biden's announcement is "an important step in continuing our proud, bipartisan tradition of providing refugees protection through resettlement."