

Correcting the record:

Five reasons why the Biden administration should keep its commitments on refugee admissions and raise the cap to 62,500

April 2021



On Friday, April 16, President Biden issued an [Emergency Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions for FY 2021](#), keeping the refugee admissions cap at the Trump-era, all-time low of 15,000 and restoring region-based admissions categories. Later that day, the administration clarified that a subsequent Determination would be issued on or before May 15 to increase the admissions cap. **The International Rescue Committee urges President Biden to act quickly to prevent any further harm to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) by setting an admissions cap of 62,500 refugees, as his administration [previously proposed to Congress](#).**

1. The Biden administration proposed in February to increase FY 2021 refugee admissions to a level of 62,500 on the basis of “new political violence, humanitarian crises, and growing threats to refugees.” Nothing has changed about these grave humanitarian concerns to justify a retreat from 62,500.

Today there are an estimated 1.4 million refugees in need of resettlement globally, while global resettlement slots have dropped by 50 percent over the last four years. **The refugee population grew by 7 million over the course of the Trump administration to nearly 30 million worldwide.** Unforeseen emergency situations, [according to the State Department](#), include “rapidly emerging or deteriorating” crises across the Great Lakes region, Southern Africa, Ethiopia, Burma, China, Syria, and Central and South America. According to the [UN Refugee Agency](#), resettlement needs from the Americas alone have grown by nearly 500% from 2020 to 2021. The Biden administration’s commitment to reverse course and set an ambitious refugee admissions goal provided a lifeline to refugees in precarious situations and signaled a return to global cooperation on refugees.

2. The Biden administration cited “U.S. national interest” in justifying an emergency revision to 62,500 refugees. Those U.S. national interests remain critical and underserved.

A U.S. retreat from resettlement has profound implications for America’s foreign policy, national security interests, and global stability. **In keeping the admissions cap at an unprecedented low, the administration is ignoring a pivotal tool for sharing responsibility.** Resettling refugees from its allies who are hosting more than their fair share – like Syrian refugees from Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey – is an essential foreign policy mechanism to contribute to regional stability and security. The U.S.’s willingness to resettle a small percentage of refugees influences host countries to provide safe haven to significantly larger populations of displaced people, preventing forced returns of refugees that can destabilize conflict-affected regions. It is also a key way to show solidarity with those fleeing persecution, like in Myanmar where political upheaval is fueling a growing refugee crisis. And, when the U.S. leads, other countries follow: **America has historically leveraged its own resettlement leadership to garner increased commitments to refugee protection with global partners.**

The USRAP is also part of a critical promise to protect U.S. allies in Iraq and Afghanistan from a lifetime of fear, or even death, by offering them safety in the U.S. The Afghan and Iraqi Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) programs and Iraqi Direct Access (Priority-2) admissions are crucial ways for the U.S. to ensure the effectiveness of military, diplomatic, and intelligence operations abroad and to safeguard U.S. troops. With 100,000 Iraqi applicants stuck in processing, the U.S. is abandoning our allies and threatening its credibility with key partners in the region.

At home, the USRAP [strengthens the U.S. economy](#): refugees fill critical gaps in the labor market; have [high rates of entrepreneurship](#), creating jobs and boosting local economies; and during the COVID-19 pandemic, many refugees are [working on the front lines](#) and in essential jobs.

3. There is sufficient capacity to support anticipated refugee arrivals in FY 2021.

The USRAP is a public-private partnership between the U.S. government and refugee resettlement agencies. Refugee resettlement agencies partner with the federal government to welcome refugees and ensure their successful integration into American society. **Hundreds of community- and faith-based organizations are ready to support increased refugee arrivals.** States, communities, and the American public have [repeatedly demonstrated](#) their support for refugee resettlement.

4. Federal agencies administering the USRAP are adequately resourced to scale up the program.

For FY 2021, the Office of Refugee Resettlement in the Department of Health and Human Services and the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration in the Department of State were appropriated adequate funds to administer the USRAP. These funding levels have been more or less level since the Obama administration.

The administration has the capacity and resources to support both robust resettlement and asylum protections: programs serving refugees and unaccompanied children have distinct funding streams and the processing of refugees and asylum seekers is led by different agencies. The Department of Homeland Security has dedicated staff for both refugee resettlement and asylum claim adjudications.

5. An admissions level of 15,000 locks out thousands of refugees who could be readied for resettlement this fiscal year.

Today, there are more than 30,000 refugees conditionally approved by the U.S. government to be resettled and more than 100,000 refugees currently in the process. **Keeping the refugee admissions goal at the all-time low of 15,000 sends a devastating message to these tens of thousands of refugees:** that the U.S. is reneging on its promise to restore its global leadership on refugee protection. With five months left in the fiscal year, there is still ample time to renew commitment to USRAP expansion and lay the foundation for an even more ambitious admissions goal in FY 2022.

Looking forward: Five ways to strengthen the program today

1. Set an ambitious and aspirational refugee admissions goal.

The refugee admissions goal in the annual Presidential Determination on Refugee Admissions is an ambition that the U.S. government and resettlement agencies aspire to achieve, even when capacity lags behind intent. **Following the slowdown in refugee admissions post-9/11, President Bush set the goal at 70,000 as a signal of his aim to return to robust resettlement, which he did over the course of his presidency.** Over the forty-year history of the USRAP, the admissions cap has been met less than a quarter of the time; rather, admissions goals have been set as a high-water mark to motivate improvements and efficiencies in the program.

2. Unlock resources to support USRAP capacity building.

The refugee admissions goal dictates how much capacity resettlement agencies need to have and unlocks resources to help them meet the need. Resettlement agencies are funded on a per capita (per refugee) basis. **An ambitious goal is a prerequisite to beginning the process of strengthening the program.** There is no

way for resettlement agencies to prepare for future increases in admissions – like the President’s stated goal of 125,000 refugees in FY 2022 – without an admissions cap that allows for capacity building today.

3. Expedite the inter-agency review of refugee processing and vetting.

President Biden rightfully directed a review of the USRAP’s security vetting component in his February [Executive Order 14013](#). **This inter-agency effort is urgently needed to bring the program back online and further delays should be avoided.** A review of security vetting and the development of recommendations on potential efficiencies and resourcing strategies was due on March 6 and a review of the countries and criteria requiring a Security Advisory Opinion was due on April 5. Measures like enabling remote interviewing, resourcing the Refugee Access Verification Unit, and expediting Follow-to-Join and P-3 cases are key ways to alleviate acute pain points in the refugee processing pipeline and will be critical to increase arrivals in the near- and long-term.

4. Establish a public-private task force to examine program barriers and advance solutions.

The administration should establish regular consultation and communication with refugee resettlement stakeholders, providers, and technical experts to strengthen the public-private partnership upon which the USRAP is founded. **Increased communication and information sharing across the resettlement community will improve capacity to respond to refugee needs, advance innovative solutions to current barriers, and build trust across partners.**

5. Increase consistent public reporting for transparency, accountability, and operational benefit.

Resettlement agencies are partners that need real-time information in order to implement the USRAP effectively. **The administration should work to increase transparency across stakeholders, domestic and overseas, so all program implementers can prepare and accurately anticipate program expansions.** The administration should also resume the release of detailed refugee arrivals data on the State Department’s WRAPSnet.org and make the reports and reviews directed by Executive Order 14013 publicly available to the greatest extent possible.