

Biden keeps U.S. refugee cap at Trump-era 15,000 - for now

President Joe Biden signed an order on Friday limiting U.S. refugee admissions this year to the historically low 15,000 cap set under his predecessor Donald Trump, shelving a plan to raise it to 62,500 and drawing the ire of refugee advocates and some Democratic lawmakers.

But as criticism mounted, the White House issued a statement saying Biden would set a “final, increased refugee cap” for the remainder of this fiscal year by May 15.

Biden’s order to limit admissions to 15,000 was a blow to advocacy groups that wanted the Democratic president to move swiftly to reverse the refugee policies of the Republican Trump, who had set the figure as a way to limit immigration.

The program for admitting refugees is distinct from the asylum system for migrants. Refugees must be vetted while still overseas and cleared for entry to the U.S., unlike migrants who arrive at a U.S. border and then request asylum.

Biden, who took office in January, had signaled two months ago plans to raise the cap during the 2021 fiscal year ending on Sept. 30, but held off on actually doing so.

The president’s cautious approach appears to have been tied to concerns over the optics of admitting more refugees at a time of rising numbers of migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border in recent months, and to not wanting to look “too open” or “soft,” another U.S. official with knowledge of the matter told Reuters.

Criticism was swift. “Facing the greatest refugee crisis in our time there is no reason to limit the number to 15,000. Say it ain’t so, President Joe,” said U.S. Senator Dick Durbin, the second-highest-ranking Democrat in the Senate. Advocates say the two groups of migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, are distinct and that resettlement was long neglected under Trump.

Hours later as the complaints flowed in, White House spokeswoman Jen Psaki said in a statement the original announcement had been “the subject of some

confusion” and that a final refugee cap for the year would be set by May 15.

Psaki said Biden’s “initial goal of 62,500 seems unlikely” between now and the end of the fiscal year on Oct. 1, “given the decimated refugee admissions program we inherited.”

Republicans have blamed Biden for the situation at the border, faulting his moves to reverse other Trump-era hardline immigration policies.

Biden pledged in February to increase the number of refugees admitted in the next fiscal year to 125,000.

Under the presidential determination signed by Biden, the United States will offer refugee status to a wider part of the world than had been allowed by Trump by changing the allocation of refugee slots, the senior administration official said.



U.S. President Joe Biden delivers remarks on Russia in the East Room at the White House in Washington, U.S., April 15, 2021. REUTERS/Tom Brenner



U.S. President Joe Biden speaks after the House of Representatives passed his \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief package in the Roosevelt Room of the White House in Washington, U.S., February 27, 2021. REUTERS/Joshua Roberts - RC281M9NH5NG

Under Biden's new plan, the 15,000 slots would be allocated this way: 7,000 for Africa, 1,000 for East Asia, 1,500 for Europe and Central Asia, 3,000 from Latin America and the Caribbean, 1,500 from the Near East and South Asia, and 1,000 for an unallocated reserve.

'UTTERLY UNACCEPTABLE'

Democratic Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez wrote on Twitter that the cap was "completely and utterly unacceptable."

"Biden promised to welcome immigrants, and people voted for him based on that promise," Ocasio-Cortez wrote.

Democratic U.S. Representative Pramila Jayapal called Biden's decision not to raise Trump's "harmful, xenophobic and racist refugee cap" unconscionable.

Stephen Miller, an immigration hardliner and White House adviser under Trump, said on Twitter that Biden was likely concerned that border issues could lead to losses for Democrats in the 2022 midterm elections. Miller said he would favor “zero” refugee admissions.

Refugee advocates called the decision unjustified given that there are around 35,000 refugees who have already been vetted for security and cleared for entry to the United States, with a total of about 100,000 at various stages in the pipeline.

Refugee groups previously expressed frustration that Biden had delayed issuing the cap for months, which left refugees who were scheduled to travel stranded. Mark Hetfield, president of the HIAS resettlement agency, said around 700 flights were canceled due to the holdup.

“One can’t help but guess that they are conflating the refugee issue with what is happening at the border with the refugee program, which is a real disservice,” Hetfield told Reuters.

An increasing number of families and unaccompanied minors from Central America, many seeking asylum, have been among those detained at the border in recent months. The refugee program offers a pathway for people to apply abroad to resettle in the United States. Advocates were dismayed by the small number of slots for Central Americans in the announced cap.

Refugee admissions reached historic lows under Trump, who portrayed refugees as a security threat and made limiting the number of immigrants allowed into the United States a hallmark of his presidency.

The International Rescue Committee refugee advocacy group called Biden’s action “a disturbing and unjustified retreat.”

If resettlement continues at the current pace, the group said, Biden “is on track to resettle the lowest number of refugees of any president in U.S. history.”

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<https://www.reuters.com/world/americas/biden-keeps-us-refugee-cap-15000-rather-than-raise-it-official-2021-04-16/>

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