

More Iraqi refugees resettled in U.S., but number is still small

WASHINGTON - More than 1,000 refugees from Iraq arrived in the United States in May, the most in recent months, bringing the fiscal-year total to 4,742 so far, the State Department reported June 3.

But with just four months left in the fiscal year, the administration's objective of resettling 12,000 Iraqis in the U.S. by October is far from being reached, said Anastasia Brown, director of refugee programs for Migration and Refugee Services of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

She added that even that goal is an inadequate fraction of the estimated 4.9 million Iraqis who have been forced to leave their homes by the war.

At a press briefing June 3, Ambassador James Foley, senior coordinator for Iraqi refugees and former ambassador to Haiti, said systems are finally in place to process the applications of would-be refugees within Iraq. Processing systems in adjacent countries are working more smoothly than before, he said, though there are still problems, particularly in Syria, where as many as 1.4 million Iraqis have sought temporary protection.

In congressional testimony a month earlier, Ms. Brown cited estimates that 2.7 million Iraqis have been forced from their homes but remain in the country. Another 2.2 million people have managed to flee Iraq; most of them are living in unsettled situations in nearby countries.

Foley said 7,800 people have finished the preliminary stages of the resettlement process, more than enough to meet the goal of 12,000 by the end of the fiscal year Sept. 30, but he added there are no guarantees of how many will be able to complete the process and reach the United States.

For instance, he said, the extreme violence in Lebanon in May prevented a "circuit riding" team from the State Department from going into that country to process refugee cases. And some countries have particularly cumbersome systems for

issuing exit permits for refugees to leave.

The first two refugees who left directly from Iraq reached the United States in May, Foley said, and another 70 people in Iraq have been conditionally approved to leave. Ms. Brown said Iraqis leaving directly from their home country are mostly employees of the U.S. government and their families.

In her May testimony to two House Foreign Affairs subcommittees, Ms. Brown called the Iraqi refugee situation “a looming humanitarian crisis.”

Foley said the majority of Iraqi refugees admitted to the United States have come from Jordan, a country with which the United States has warm diplomatic relations and where the processing systems work relatively smoothly. Far fewer have been admitted from Syria, despite the great number of refugees there, because of more tenuous diplomatic ties, he said.

Ms. Brown, who has supervised the U.S. church’s role in resettling about 30 percent of the Iraqi refugees to date, told Catholic News Service June 4 that the report that 1,141 Iraqis reached the U.S. in May is “a great beginning, but is it enough?”

Most of the 4,742 Iraqi refugees admitted this year were processed by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees last year, Ms. Brown said, and tens of thousands more are waiting for the United States to finish its part of background checks and paperwork processing.

As of April, the UNHCR had submitted the paperwork for 24,185 Iraqi refugees to the United States since February 2007. In the 2006 fiscal year, the U.S. received 200 Iraqi refugees. The U.N. agency handles processing for refugees worldwide.

Ms. Brown said one of the recent complications of the Iraqi refugee situation is that some people, tired of waiting in difficult circumstances in countries including Syria, are moving to other countries, such as Malaysia.

She said 1,000 Iraqis who recently moved to Malaysia find it comparatively easy to get into the country because it does not require entry visas. That may make it possible for people to make a living without attracting attention from authorities.

However, she said, Malaysia doesn't recognize their refugee status, and actively detains anyone found to be living there without permission.

Although Foley suggested the security situation in Iraq may be settling down, based on an apparent decrease in the number of people leaving, Ms. Brown said this phenomenon could also be explained by the fact that Syria now requires refugees to come in with a visa that is difficult to obtain. Jordan has officially closed its border to Iraqi refugees.