

USCCB urges greater U.S. resettlement assistance

WASHINGTON – The U.S. government should provide resettlement aid for 25,000 Iraqi refugees in the next fiscal year, 10 times the number expected to arrive by the end of the year, said one recommendation of a new report by the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops on the Iraqi refugee crisis in the Middle East.

“Iraqi refugees with relatives in the United States should be considered for U.S. resettlement on the basis of family reunification, dropping the requirement that they enter as refugees or migrants,” said the report, “Escaping Mayhem and Murder: Iraqi Refugees in the Middle East.”

The report, issued Sept. 10 in Washington, was based on a seven-member USCCB fact-finding mission undertaken July 2-13. Among the seven participants were Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, and Bishop Nicholas DiMarzio of Brooklyn, N.Y., chairman of the U.S. bishops’ domestic policy committee.

The delegation visited Istanbul, Turkey; Beirut, Lebanon; Amman, Jordan; and Damascus, Syria. These countries currently are home to an estimated 2 million Iraqi refugees.

“At the time of our visit, an estimated 50,000 people a month continued to stream across Iraq’s borders, mostly to Syria,” the report said. “As of late August, the estimate was 60,000.”

Iraqi refugees, when added to Palestinian refugees already in other countries, account for up to 10 percent of Syria’s population and 24 percent of Jordan’s, the report said.

“In our estimation, the number who actually arrive in the U.S. by the end of this calendar year will be about 2,500,” the report said. “The process of getting security clearances for those accepted takes an average of 65 days all by itself,” it added.

“Among the tens of thousands of Iraqis working for the U.S. government and U.S. contractors in Iraq today, many are in mortal danger,” the report said. “The U.S. should consider allowing them to apply in place for U.S. resettlement without having to make the dangerous and expensive trip to a nearby country, which may not admit them in any case.”

The report spoke of “the special responsibility of the United States” in addressing Iraqi refugee issues. The United States went to war with Iraq in 2003.

“What was not evident to us before our trip was the extent to which many refugees have been specifically victimized for their association with Americans,” it said. “We understood that U.S. government interpreters were being targeted, but did not appreciate that the extremists in Iraq were also wreaking retribution on Iraqis with even tenuous relationships with U.S. policies, such as cooks and drivers for U.S. contractors.”

One host country’s government told the USCCB delegation that it suspects “the U.S. is interested in assisting only those with close associations with our country, leaving the host countries to absorb the rest.”

Syria estimates it hosts 1.4 million Iraqi refugees. Jordan is home to up to 750,000 refugees. Lebanon’s refugee population is estimated at between 25,000 and 50,000. Turkey has the fewest refugees at 10,000.

Jordan said July 25 it was spending about \$1 billion annually for refugees. The government in August said also children, including refugee children, could attend public schools, and that it would open 30 public schools in Amman, the capital, for Iraqi refugees.

Syria announced a policy in early September to require Iraqis to obtain a visa in Baghdad before entry to Syria is allowed. Even though Syria has offered free school for refugee children, only about 10 percent of the estimated 300,000 school-age children go to classes, the report said, “due to the scarcity of classrooms and teachers, the need of many refugee children to work, and, in one case we saw, the lack of an Iraqi document certifying previous schooling.”

About 19 percent of Syria’s Iraqi refugees are Christian, with about half Chaldean Catholics. About 15 percent of Jordan’s Iraqi refugees are Christian, mostly Chaldean.

The USCCB report recommended that the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees give training to refugee workers about which refugees have “protection needs” and should be referred to the UNHCR on those grounds.

“We encountered clear protection cases that had not been so referred,” the report said. It added that, since the U.S. has no resettlement quota for difficult medical cases, the UNHCR should go “full speed” in referring those cases to the U.S. resettlement program.