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Iraqi Refugees Heading to Philly

Posted July 31, 2008 at 10:05 AM

When Iraq War casualties are mentioned, the first things that come to most Americans minds are undoubtedly U.S. military deaths – which reached 4124 this week – and possibly the number of Iraqi civilians killed: upwards of 100,000.

But with the war into its fifth year, another type of casualty is only increasing, one not often mentioned by the media and far from most Americans' minds: Iraqi civilians permanently displaced by the war. It can happen many ways: the bombing of a house, death of a family breadwinner, militia threats or even kidnapping, to name a few. Many Iraqis who can afford it have fled to neighboring Jordan or Syria, but even if they make it there, they often don't have the finances or the connections to rebuild some semblance of their former lives.

The U.S. government has programs in place to assist foreign refugees in crisis, but for years, few Iraqis were resettled here. Last year, however, the United States Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) began to change that, significantly expanding its capacity to consider Iraqi refugees for resettlement.

Since last spring, a total of 27,940 Iraqis have been referred for resettlement to the USRAP. United States Citizenship and Immigration Services has interviewed 18,926 Iraqi refugee applicants, approved 13,067 for resettlement and 6,480 Iraqi refugees have arrived in the U.S. as of June 4, 2008.

But where do these refugees go? Well, until recently, they weren't coming to Philadelphia—the city was not approved as a host for Iraqi refugees. But in February of this year, in a large part due to the organization's persistence, the Nationalities Service Center (NSC) was approved to resettle 35 Iraqi refugees in Philadelphia. According to Juliane Ramic, the NSC's Director of Refugee and Community Services, 42 Iraqis have resettled in Philadelphia this year and 100 more are expected to arrive before September 30.

"In a 24-hour period the Nationalities Service Center got word from the government that they were going to resettle the first family and they arrived. They had nowhere for them to stay; they were completely unprepared," says Johanna Berrigan, founder of Philadelphia's House of Grace Catholic Worker Clinic, which provides health care, food and housing to those in need. "They called me, and our community received the first Iraqi family."

By that time Berrigan, a lifelong peace worker and human rights activist, had already traveled to Iraq six times, most recently during the height of the invasion in January 2004. Despite her many visits, Berrigan says she became most aware of the tremendous number of refugees in need only last spring, after repeatedly hearing about them from contacts in the Middle East and her own humanitarian trip to Syria.

"Both the media and the State Department are not paying enough attention to this crisis," she says.

Last fall a young mother and two teenage children, a boy and a girl, arrived at Berrigan's housing community in North Philadelphia.

"It was an amazing thing to receive somebody after that long a trip, to welcome them," Berrigan remembers. "The first thing [the mother] said was that she never believed she would meet Americans with such sweet eyes."

Berrigan brought them to their rooms and tried her best to make them comfortable. "Within 10 minutes [the mother] broke down crying because her biggest burden and heartbreak was that her mother was stuck back in Jordan and couldn't come with them because her paperwork hadn't been processed."

It turns out the woman's mother was sick, and wasn't able to get the medicine she needed in Jordan. Berrigan told the woman she'd be returning to Jordan soon and would try to help her—which is exactly what she did. During her last visit to the Middle East, Berrigan was able to hand deliver the woman's medicine and make sure she was well cared for until her paperwork could go through.

Berrigan has since housed several other families at the Catholic Worker and, along with the NSC, helps them find permanent housing in the city and solicits donations of common housewares to get them on their feet. "Everybody deserves safety and freedom," she says.

She worries the only coverage of Iraqi refugees focuses on those whose lives have been threatened because they've worked with Americans.

"There's much more attention being given to these professionals and Iraqi journalists who have worked with the military," she explains. "They're being given priority—and even that is happening at a slower rate than it should—but the worst part is there's almost no chance for anyone who isn't in those categories." Berrigan thinks a major reason is a lack of awareness of the issue.

"I think it's underreported in the media," she says. "I think it's an important thing to engage people of this country in, and particularly the peace community. What other country should be doing more for these people?"

Check back in the coming weeks for more on this issue and a video interview with Iraqi refugees who have recently resettled in Philadelphia.



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