



Briefing on Developments in the Iraqi Refugee and Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) Admissions Programs

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Senior Coordinator on Iraqi Refugee Issues Ambassador James Foley, Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs Tony Edson, and the Department of Homeland Security's Senior Advisor to the Secretary on Iraqi Refugee Issues Lori Scialabba

2:05 p.m. EST

MR. GALLEGOS: Good afternoon, you all. Thanks for coming. Today, on the record, we have Senior Coordinator on Iraqi Refugee Issues for the State Department Ambassador James Foley; we have DHS Senior Advisor to the Secretary on Iraqi Refugee Issues Lori Scialabba, and then we have our Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs Tony Edson. Ambassador Foley will begin.

MR. EDSON: Edson.

MR. GALLEGOS: Excuse me. Edson.

MR. EDSON: Still two syllables.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Thank you all for coming. I'm very pleased to be here with my two esteemed colleagues from Homeland Security and Consular Affairs. The purpose of the briefing today is to update you on our efforts to resettle Iraqi refugees in the U.S. I'm going to announce the latest statistics on our arrivals for the month of January and describe the ambitious effort underway to reach our fiscal year 2008 admissions goals and share our initial plans to implement new legislation recently signed into law by the President on Iraqi refugee matters.

First, the latest figures: 375 Iraqi refugees arrived in the U.S. during the month of January. This brings the total for this fiscal year to 1,432. Since the program started last year, 3,040 Iraqis have arrived in the U.S. as refugees. Others have come in under different immigrant visas.

You'll recall that the Administration has set a goal of 12,000 arrivals for fiscal year 2008, so we have 10,568 to go between now and September 30. This is a tall order, but it remains attainable. I am aware that the monthly arrival numbers since the beginning of the fiscal year have been criticized and that there is skepticism over our prospects for reaching the goal. Critical press reports last month, in particular on the December arrival numbers, were based, frankly, on several premises with which I take some issue.

First, it was asserted that the Administration had pledged to boost arrival numbers to roughly 1,000 per month. Now, we pledged to reach the goal of 12,000 by the end of the fiscal year, but not to average 1,000 per month.

Second, it was suggested that it would be difficult for us to compensate for these current low numbers by admitting more than 1,000 refugees per month later in the fiscal year and that there were few precedents for this. In fact, over the last decade or two, we've admitted several thousand refugee arrivals per month in quite a number of cases involving Burmese, Somali, Liberian, Russian and Kosovar refugees. And we're going to do it this time with the Iraqi caseload.

Finally, it was suggested that there was, quote, "bureaucratic infighting" between the Departments of State and Homeland Security that was responsible for the current rate of arrivals of Iraqi refugees. I think we're here today to tell you that that is not the case. Our two agencies have quite different mandates and it's natural for us to bring different perspectives to policy issues, but on this complicated and challenging effort to resettle Iraqi refugees, our cooperation is essential and it has been excellent.

The fact of the matter is that the arrival of refugees in the U.S. is the last step of a long process involving multiple actors, not only the Departments of State and Homeland Security but also UNHCR, the International Migration Office, which is one of our overseas processing entities but not the only one, and a number of governments in the region. And the volume of arrivals over which so much attention has been focused is itself the result of a process of capacity building that is evolving and growing month by month.

The process began barely one year ago, in late January of 2007 when UNHCR decided to expand its presence in the region and agreed to begin making large numbers of referrals of Iraqi refugees to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program by the summer of 2007. UNHCR encountered some initial hurdles to its plans, and at the same time the U.S. had to confront the fact and address the fact that we had no permanent processing facilities in Syria and Jordan where most of the 2 million Iraqi refugees had fled.

Our overseas processing entities who do the pre-screening of these cases, [and] had to locate, rent, renovate new facilities in both capitals. They had to hire and train staff members, quite numerous numbers. And as I indicated, building up this capacity is simply not an overnight process and it continues to the present.

May 1 of last year was an important milestone – the date that our overseas processing entity in Amman was able to move into its new facility. And our first big DHS circuit ride took place in June – in the June/July period. A second one followed in Amman in August/September, a third in October/December – in that period. Smaller circuit rides also took place in Istanbul and Cairo. The arrival numbers that you're seeing today were produced in some of those early circuit rides. In Damascus we had our first DHS circuit ride in the May/June period. But as you know, DHS was subsequently unable to operate there for the entire period from June until November, so that prolonged absence has had a significant impact on our current arrival numbers.

The important news is that our refugee processing capacity and that of our partners as well has been increasing to the point where we anticipate being in a position to conduct a substantial volume of interviews in the second and third quarters of the fiscal year: over 5,500 in the current quarter, right now, and up to 8,000 in the next quarter, the third quarter. While we will not cross the 1,000 arrivals per month threshold until sometime in the spring, we are confident that we will have substantial numbers of arrivals in the fourth quarter of the fiscal year, and thus we continue to aim for 12,000 arrivals by the end of September.

This is not a guarantee by any means. The results depend on numerous factors and variables, including important ones that are not under our control. We've had exceptional cooperation from UNHCR, but we are aware, for example, of the apparent limits on refugee referrals in Jordan, where the number of refugees registered has not progressed much beyond 50,000. And there is a difference between those registered and those – normally a very small percentage – of those registered who might be deemed necessary for referral for third-country resettlement. In Syria, we recognize the burden posed by an enormous refugee population and we appreciate the cooperation on this issue that has allowed us to resume refugee processing. Still, limits on our refugee processing capacity there will make it hard for the program to

reach its full potential.

Let me say here that I have the impression that most observers are not actually aware of how complicated the refugee admissions process is. We've actually cut the average overall processing time in half, but it is still necessarily a multi-stage effort and delays can occur at virtually any point in the process. And it hasn't been cut in half yet in Syria, given the problem that I mentioned from last year. And security vetting is only one component of this process, but of course, it is an absolutely critical part, ensuring the integrity of the program.

I'd like to walk you through the life cycle of a refugee case just to illustrate this multi-stage process. First, there's an individual referral – or an individual is referred. It's called a P-1 referral by the overseas processing entity – received by the – excuse me, received by our overseas processing entity; referral by UNHCR in most cases [or] by an embassy, by an NGO. Secondly, the OPE schedules the applicant's prescreening appointments and contacts the applicant. Third, an OPE case worker conducts prescreening and collects bio data on all case members on their education, work history, takes photos, collects information on possible anchors or relatives in the U.S. and collects their persecution story, which is critical to the DHS adjudication under U.S. law.

Then the – and by the way, some OPEs do this in one long appointment; some do it in two appointments. Next, the OPE initiates name checks by the Refugee Processing Center, as required. This is obviously a security element. Next, the OPE schedules the case for interview by USCIS. The USCIS interview takes place and at that time, you collect fingerprints.

Now there could be a denial of the case outright at that stage or if it's approved – the case approved or conditionally approved, applicants undergo medical screening. And the Refugee Processing Center requests sponsorship assurance from a nongovernmental organization in the United States. And the OPE then schedules the applicant for cultural orientation there where he or she is overseas.

Now, once the fingerprint checks are completed, which generally takes two to four weeks after the date of the USCIS interview, and the name checks clear, a USCIS officer must stamp the applications, called an I-590, for approval. Once the case is medically cleared and sponsorship is received, which generally is concurrent with the completion of security checks, and the cultural orientation is complete and the application is stamped, then the case can be booked for flight to the U.S. at least two to four weeks prior to the flight, depending on the location. The final step, apart from showing up at the airport which is indeed an important step as I will illustrate in a moment, exit permission is requested. In Turkey, it's – it can take four weeks and I'll get back to that – it differs from country to country.

Now, there are built into these stages – there is built into these stages, potential for delay at any one of these stages. Let me go through some of the possible – some of the delays that we do encounter in these stages. First, the FBI or CIA hold on a name check can happen. Most cases are cleared within 30 to 45 days after submitting the name check request. But those who get a hold can be delayed longer – much longer. Secondly, the fingerprint may lead or provoke a need for investigation or re-interview by USCIS, depending on the results.

Third, a case can be put on hold, in other words, not approved, not rejected, but put on hold for material support reasons. And the time necessary to resolve these kinds of holds varies. Fourth, there can be employment verification delays. Fifth, medical conditions that require treatment before the case is able to travel. Sixth, if there's an add-on to the case after the interview, another family member is added or is born even, then there may be a need for re-interview. Then if there's a name check hit that requires a re-interview by USCIS, that has to be scheduled for the next circuit ride. Applicants sometimes move and don't inform the OPE or UNHCR of their new location or contact information.

Finally, I mentioned the exit permission process. It's handled differently in each country. In Jordan, our OPE, IOM, passes the paperwork to UNHCR and they handle the request for the exit permit with the Jordanian authorities and this can take two weeks or less. In Syria, the refugees go themselves to the Syrian immigration authorities and that can take three to four weeks. In Turkey, the Government there requires at least four weeks to process the exit permit because many refugees have to return to their point of entry. No matter where it is in the country, they have to go back to that point of entry and it can entail and often does entail a 12-hour-plus bus ride and they have to pay their overstay fines. And some applicants then miss their flights as a result of that.

Finally, there – as I was just indicating, there is an element of attrition in this process. In other words, would-be refugees who drop out at one stage or another. There are no-show referrals, in other words, refugees who do not appear for pre-screening with our Overseas Processing Entity having been referred by UNHCR. There are no-shows for the DHS adjudication interviews. There are no-show departures. In other words, applicants who don't appear at the airport to take their scheduled flight to the U.S. There are different reasons for the attrition. Some families return to Iraq at different points in the processing. Some applicants pursue both special immigrant visa and refugee processing at the same time and they ultimately opt for the SIV route. Some applicants treat the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program as a kind of a safety net and when the time comes to board the plane for the U.S., it turns out that they're not ready to depart. And finally some applicants change their minds about wanting to resettle in the U.S.

The attrition shows up in our statistics. For example, our OPEs have been unable to locate 608 refugees referred to our program. There have been 227 no-shows for pre-screening – OPE pre-screening or DHS interviews or medical appointments. There were 104 no-shows for departure flights that had to be rescheduled, which takes a certain amount of work and of man-hours to accomplish. And there are 51 more who missed their first departure flights who still need to be rescheduled. And finally we've closed the cases of 25 individuals who did not show up at all for departure flights.

I want to just say quickly a word or two about a very important dimension of our refugee – our responsibilities towards Iraqi refugees and that has to do with the assistance side. As I mentioned, only a small percentage of refugees are deemed eligible or in need of third-country resettlement. For those who remain in place in the region awaiting, we all hope, the possibility of returning to their homes in Iraq, which most of them want to do, they need to be assisted in place. They need to be protected in place. And last year the U.S. provided \$171 million in humanitarian assistance to Iraqi refugees, internally displaced and conflict victims. And we're going to maintain and increase our support this year. We already announced recently a contribution of \$20 million to a joint UN health appeal to meet the medical needs of Iraqis.

But we recognize that the needs are large and growing as refugees in the region are increasingly running out of resources, running out of savings, having difficulty paying their rent. This is an urban population. They're not in camps. And UNHCR and our partner international organizations are aware of the increasing needs. UNHCR has increased its appeal for inside Iraq and neighboring countries from \$123 million in 2007 to \$261 million in '08. We anticipate that altogether, the different NGO [and] international organizations' appeals will exceed \$700 million this year. And we have – Congress appropriated \$200 million in emergency assistance to address the needs of both Iraqi and Palestinian refugees. Back on the 25th of January, we notified Congress of our plan for divvying up that money and so Congress is currently reviewing this. But that will not be the end of the story. We expect to provide greater contributions this year, later in the year, and that will certainly exceed what was provided last year.

I'd like to say a little bit, if you're interested, about the defense authorization bill which contained the Iraqi – what's the exact name of the bill?

MS. SCIALABBA: Refugee –

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Refugee Crisis in Iraq Act of 2007, which just passed and was signed by the President which gives us new responsibilities in terms of processing Iraqi refugees. I think I'll stop here and return to that, if you're interested a bit later in the briefing.

Now, after that "short" introduction, I'd like to turn it over to Lori Scialabba.

MS. SCIALABBA: Thanks, Jim. I just wanted to make a brief statement and I would like to also go over the numbers of interviews that we've conducted so far in the region. I also brought along and I probably don't have enough of them – what Jim just described to you is the Refugee Resettlement Process. This is the flowchart that shows what that process is. It's generalized, obviously, which might help in terms of understanding the complexity of the process.

DHS is committed to working closely with State Department and we have worked closely with State Department to meet the goal of 12,000 admissions. Our role in the process, as Jim described, is to interview and adjudicate the cases, perform certain security checks, not all of them but certain ones, and make sure that the cases get finally approved once all the necessary steps have been completed. We've been doing this on a timely basis in coordination with the other program partners and we'll continue to do so.

The other thing that I brought along is a – like a little puzzle of the various partners that are involved in the refugee program. I think the point that I wanted to make with this chart is that if any one of these particular puzzle pieces falls by the wayside – if for instance, a host government, as we saw with Syria, decides that they aren't going to cooperate – then the refugee process winds to a halt. This is a generalized view of all the UNHC – all the partners that are involved in refugee processing. And as I said, if any of these pieces isn't there, the refugee process can't continue.

Finally, the last chart that I brought along is Post-Interview Case Processing. Before I give that one out, though, I want to go over some of the numbers in terms of the interviews that have been done to date. Up to this point, approximately 17,000 individuals have been referred to the U.S. Refugee Program various ways through – mostly through UNCHR, but also through embassy referrals, a few – very few NGO referrals. 7,700 of those individuals have already been interviewed by USCIS; 4,500 of those were in FY'07; 3,300 of those have been in FY'08. That would leave approximately 9,300 individuals remaining to be interviewed. And as Jim mentioned, this second quarter, we plan to do 5,500. Interviews are scheduled for the second quarter that we're in right now. We've got 21 USCIS officers in the region doing interviews currently and that would leave about 3,800 that are yet to be scheduled for USCIS interviews.

And as Jim mentioned, we plan to do 8,000 interviews in the third quarter of the fiscal year.

He also described what can happen post-interview for recommended approvals. This graph kind of lays out what the various processes are, where holes can take place during the process, what has to be done before a refugee can actually travel. And he did a good job of going through that, but that's just kind of a graph that gives you the basics of where something can happen during the process where a person may not be able to travel immediately.

I should also mention DHS and the Department of State have agreed to do in-country processing for locally employed staff at the embassy. And as you know, the recent legislation calls for further in-country processing. But we anticipate that USCIS officers will be traveling to Baghdad in late February, early March to conduct interviews. Many of the security checks for those awaiting interviews have already been completed. So we anticipate that that will go quickly once we are on the ground.

I think that – no, I went over the numbers. I think that's all I wanted to cover right now. I might come back and cover some SIV numbers, if you want, after Tony gives his presentation.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Good. Before turning it to Tony, let me just mention, we're going to talk at this point about the new legislation, the Kennedy bill. We're grateful to the Congress and to the President for this piece of legislation which gives us expanded authorities in regard to Iraqi refugees. In one sense, it provides that certain Iraqis may apply directly to the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program and we're going to be finalizing guidelines now on access to the program. But as Lori just mentioned, importantly, it also mandates that we expand our processing of Iraqis directly inside of Iraq – Iraqi refugees. We've begun this process. We've cooperated on this in the last few months. And we're close to processing and interviewing our embassy staff in Baghdad in the next month or so. But the act requires that expanded refugee processing mechanisms be established again inside Iraq. And we're engaged with – in planning both for expanded in-country refugee processing and also for SIV processing and that's what Tony's going to talk about – engaged with our embassy in Baghdad in consultation with the Department of Homeland Security.

As you can imagine, there are quite a number of staffing, logistical, security and other issues that we have to resolve in order to make this happen. And we're at the discussion stage, as I said, with our embassy right now. So Tony, I'd like to turn it to you to talk about special immigrant visas in general and in the context of the new legislation.

MR. EDSON: All right. Thank you. Special Immigrant Visa processing is a smaller program than the refugee program, obviously, still targeting this population in special need because of their association with the U.S. Government in Iraq. I think it's important to clarify that the Iraqis are eligible for traditional immigration programs to the United States, non-immigrant visas to the United States, and for the other categories that already exist in the law of what are called Special Immigrants. That's a legal definition that's been in the law since the Immigration and Nationality Act was passed.

Two special programs were set up that impact Iraqis. The first was the program established in '06 for 50 Iraqi and Afghan interpreters, translators, working with the Department of Defense. Just 50, limited by law, limited in the law. In July of 2007, that was increased to 500 per fiscal year. All 500 last fiscal year were processed. All 500 eligible under the law were processed. We actually – the 500 only applies to principals, to those working for the U.S. Government. So we issued Special Immigrant Visas for slightly over 1,000 people, including the 500 and their family members who applied. At this point in this fiscal year, under that program which predates the Defense Authorization Program – separate thing – we're up to 115 Special Immigrant principals and an additional 100 and change – 111 family members. All the cases that I think will be needed to meet the 500 limit under the law are actually in the field, ready for interview at this point. So I think that 500 will probably be hit in the next couple of months. The same sorts of problems and difficulties that apply to the Refugee Program apply to the – to Immigrant Visa processing as well, difficulties in access and no shows, identity documents, significant problems in making this a more time-consuming caseload.

Under the Kennedy legislation, a new category of Special Immigrant was established – the Defense Authorization Bill – a new category of Special Immigrant was established with a limit of 5,000 per fiscal year. It differs from the earlier program in that it's targeted to Iraq only. It expands the definition of who qualifies from an interpreter and translator to anyone working for or on behalf of the U.S. Government. And it adds a imminent threat of danger – I've forgotten – "ongoing serious threat" as a consequence of their employment as a requirement. The procedures for working through that program are something that CIS and State are discussing now so we can get the program up and running. Our embassy in Baghdad is heavily involved in planning this as well. But that's a – that is a separate program than the 500, and both are separate than traditional immigration.

By way of comparison, so far this year 646 Iraqis have immigrated through normal, since 1952*, immigrant visa categories, and slightly over 1,000 Iraqis have come to the United States as temporary visitors for one reason or another.

QUESTION: Wait a minute – this 12,000 does not include this 5,000? The 12,000 will go up?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Well, Congress specifically wrote into the law that it will not count as part of our global admissions goals, including the 12,000 for Iraqi refugees. However, the law does mandate that recipients of Special Immigrant Visas receive full refugee resettlement benefits, so – and unfortunately did not provide funding for that. So it is at this stage, in any case, what you could call an unfunded mandate. And the practical impact is that ultimately we'll have to take – we'll have to account for these SIV recipients, for their resettlement needs, out of the budget that goes towards the global number. So it could come at the expense of not necessarily Iraqi refugees but our global admissions numbers. Remember, the 12,000 is part of our global goal of 70,000, that in cooperation with Homeland Security we're trying to process, adjudicate, approve and have enter the U.S. this fiscal year. And resources are finite and in this case, we will face robbing Peter to pay Paul, unless the appropriation is forthcoming to pay for the resettlement benefits that will go to Special Immigrant Visa recipients under this law.

Yes.

QUESTION: Speaking of Peter, Paul and payment, how much is this – how much money is being expended on this program currently?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Which program?

QUESTION: The – well, on bringing Iraqi refugees in?

MS. RUSCH: It's hard to specify. It's on average somewhere between \$4,000 and \$4,500 per refugee, of any nationality. That's the cost to the State Department. That doesn't include DHS costs, and it certainly doesn't cost – take into account the actually larger contribution from Health and Human Services for refugees once they get here.

QUESTION: So does anybody have a figure of how much the U.S. taxpayer is spending to bring refugees in – bring Iraqi refugees in?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: We can get that for you, Charlie. We'll multiply, based on the assumption that we'll bring in 12,000 this fiscal year.

QUESTION: I don't know about the rest of us, but you've lost a – you lost me in some of the numbers. So it would be good to know if there is a number that we're spending to try and bring Iraq refugees.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Yes.

QUESTION: Janine with Bloomberg. Can I tick off a few things that maybe you could clarify? Just short things. First of all, what's the total number overall of refugees that come to the U.S., like broadly? Not beyond – does anybody know beyond Iraq or is this only in Iraq? Just to put the 12,000 in context.

Second, perhaps you can clarify this – the different status. When you come as a refugee, you're not granted citizenship, right? Are you granted temporary residence, or – and how does that compare to these Special Immigrant Visas?

And third, how do you become a refugee? Are you – you lost your house, you're scared to go home, you're – you know, what is – what actually has to happen? And then I have one other later I can ask.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: First of all, on the total figure worldwide, every year the Administration makes a determination as to our goals, our annual goals for the entire world, and this year it was set at 70,000. So that 12,000 is within that global figure. Secondly, correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe refugees have one year after arriving in the U.S. to adjust their status to become legal permanent residents.

MS. SCIALABBA: They can apply after one year to be a permanent resident. Special Immigrant Visas, you enter as a permanent resident. When you enter as a refugee, after a year, you can apply for permanent residency.

QUESTION: And then (inaudible) potentially, I guess?

MS. SCIALABBA: Not very often. I wouldn't say it never happens, but it's rare.

QUESTION: And what was the other thing I asked? About how you become a refugee. Like, how do you qualify to be a refugee?

MS. SCIALABBA: You have to have a well-founded fear of persecution based on one of the five grounds: race, nationality, membership in a particular social group, religion, political opinion. Any number of stories can fit that definition. I mean, if you lost your house because of your political opinion and you can't find anyplace else to live, you don't have anywhere else you can go, you could be a refugee based on that.

MS. RUSCH: But even in – if I may, given access to the program, it's not that somebody who's lost their house can just show up at our OPE and say, "here I am." Given the size of the world's refugee population, we want to focus the resources that are available on those that are the most vulnerable. Most of the refugees that come into the United States, and indeed in most other resettlement countries, have been referred by UNHCR, who has the mandate of the international community to look out for the needs of refugees worldwide. They determine when, in their dealings with individual cases, who are most in need of this particular durable solution, resettlement in a third country.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Lori explained U.S. law that governs the adjudication, the determination of who the U.S. will deem to be a refugee who can resettle in the United States. And Terri was referring to the UNHCR as the international body that has responsibility for refugee protection and they have a series of eligibility criteria, I think 11 criteria, that they apply in determining whether a refugee ought to be referred to a country for resettlement. As I mentioned before, the vast bulk, the vast majority do not – they remain in place – in this case, in the region – and they hope to be able to go home. But we tend to resettle or we – they tend to refer those who are the most vulnerable, who it's deemed probably can't go back home under any circumstances, even improved circumstances.

QUESTION: I have one, Elise with CNN. Thanks. A couple of – a couple quick questions. First of all, you fell short of your – last year, you wanted to resettle 7,000.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: No.

QUESTION: Yes, you did make a pledge for 7,000.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: No.

MS. RUSCH: No.

QUESTION: Ellen Sauerbrey stood up – stood in front of all of us and said the U.S. hopes to resettle 7,000 this year. Am I incorrect?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: What I can say – of course, I came on board in September, so I know the history as I know it. I wasn't here to observe it, but I believe that an official misspoke at one press event. That is true. An official misspoke at one press event. However –

QUESTION: That was the – I mean, I think everyone in this room – in the press, anyway – was going on an operating number of – that the U.S. hoped to resettle 7,000 last year.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: I think so. I think that – my impression is that's true. The press was going on that impression. However, my –

MS. SCIALABBA: We couldn't ever get it corrected.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Yeah. My understanding is that the UNHCR told us – remember, as I said, there was nothing at the beginning of '07, that UNHCR was not really operating a referral program in the region. These 2 million refugees had come to – that fled out of Iraq in '06, they – we consulted together and they – we agreed together that they were going to launch this program and make these referrals and what they told – and we had to build up our capacity. This is all beginning a year ago, January/February. And what they told us was that they felt they would be in a position to refer to us 7,000 refugees by the end of the summer, by the summer of '07. So we expected to receive those referrals by then. It's – it would be impossible to process those referrals by the end of September. That's where the confusion was, as I understand it.

QUESTION: Okay then, are you attributing the kind of inability to process as many as you'd like to, obviously, because of the UNH – the backlog in UNHCR? Do you guys have enough staff? Are there enough people out there, you know, getting the referrals and interviewing them? Because it sounds as if you're not processing as many referrals as are coming in.

And then kind of to tack on that is, you said that, you know, you're not holding to a thousand per month –

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Right.

QUESTION: You're holding to 12,000 by the end of the year.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Right.

QUESTION: But isn't the priority to get them in as quick as possible so that you have more people coming in every month instead of just like, "oh well, we reached our goal at the end of the year?" I mean, if these people need help now, isn't the goal to kind of just keep them trickling in rather than just making your quota by the end of September?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: I agree with you that – I think that –

QUESTION: So I guess, how do you speed up this process?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Our goal is not a transcendent guideline here. We – I agree with you, this is a humanitarian program. We want to help people in need. However, I would point out again, though, that resettlement is not the answer for the vast majority of refugees in any situation, and that's why I pointed to the assistance question as a growing – as a looming, bigger issue down the road that we and other countries around – responsible countries around the world are going to have to grapple with in increasing ways, I believe.

But 12,000 is a goal, but as – I think the main factor – I don't really accept the premise that our current numbers are a sign of deficiency. They are a sign of a complicated, multi-partner effort that required time to get stood up and to – and for its capacity to expand. And so if – I said this in my last press conference at the end of November; if we reach 12,000 or more, we will be pleased and if this becomes a floor for next year and future years, that's a good thing. But right now, we've been building the capacity. And as I think we both indicated, this mechanism, these processes we put in place will begin to generate and yield much higher numbers in the next months.

Now it is a fact, and I don't pretend to understand it fully, but in the annual cycle of refugee admissions in the United States, year in, year out, in countries all around the world, we tend to accelerate arrivals towards the end of the fiscal year. And the beginning of the next fiscal year, it goes down. There is sort of an inherent pressure to try to get as many arrivals in at the end of the fiscal year as is possible. And this is not the Iraqi case; this is every case around the world.

But the final element I would say is that yes, our numbers would be greater today, certainly in this early part of the fiscal year, had we not been unable to operate in Syria for the better part of 2007. That is true. But even if we had, the numbers we would be processing would be exceeded and maybe even dwarfed by what we'll be able to produce in the latter stages of the fiscal year.

QUESTION: So then these – if everyone's getting along fine and the biggest problems are Syria and potentially in-country processing in Iraq, or at least that's what would be the slow-down, still –

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: That's not a problem; that's a challenge, in-country processing.

QUESTION: Okay. Well, still, even with those – with things going along well, at least, or okay in other countries, you're still managing only two to – in the two to three hundred range for the first – for the beginning of this fiscal year. So with eight months left to go, you've got to get in 10,568.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Right.

QUESTION: Where are those people going to come from? Are they all going to come from Syria? I mean, the – on top of the ones that you're getting now from Jordan, Turkey, wherever, where are most of these people, these Iraqis, going to be coming from?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: They'll be coming across the board; large numbers in Jordan still. We hope –

QUESTION: Well, I think the question is, then, if it's large numbers in Jordan, why aren't there large numbers in Jordan now where you haven't had the same kind of problems that you've had – as you had in Syria and without the in-country processing? And I just have one more on the in-country processing as to why –

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Well, as I said, this has been a process of building our capacity and now, our overseas processing entity there is really working at – has been staffed up and is able to process large numbers. The problem – or the question in Jordan is whether it will be possible for us to obtain a high rhythm of referrals, because registrations have more or less plateaued in Jordan. So that really is the question mark there.

But to answer your first question, we will have substantial numbers of arrivals in the second half of the fiscal year that will well exceed the thousand-per-month in the latter stages of the fiscal year. And they will come from Jordan, they will come from Syria, they will come from Turkey, they will come from Egypt, they will come in smaller numbers in some of those places. They will come from the Gulf as well and am I missing any, Terri?

MS. RUSCH: Yeah, Lebanon.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: And from Lebanon, thank you, yes.

QUESTION: Now on the in-country processing, how many --

QUESTION: Iraq?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: And from Iraq, yes.

QUESTION: How many –

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Thank you, and increasingly so as we're able to operate in-country. However, I would suggest – and this remains to be seen, but the challenges of expanding our processing in Iraq are certainly significant and we'll have to see when we're able to generate significant numbers in Iraq. We have to – we have a lot of work to do to get – all the capacity I talked about that we've spent the better part of the last year developing in countries in the region, we will have to develop in the conditions that prevail in Iraq and that's going to be challenging. So when that begins to produce significant numbers is hard to say at this stage.

QUESTION: How many people are supposed to be interviewed in late February when the (inaudible) the embassy and staff are –

MS. RUSCH: It's roughly a hundred people.

QUESTION: Roughly a hundred? Okay. And then –

MS. SCIALABBA: People, it's people.

QUESTION: But there's still no – roughly a hundred people?

MS. SCIALABBA: Thirty-three cases.

QUESTION: Okay. And – but then how many – there is no – still no agreement between – on the non-embassy staff, the contract workers to process them in-country? Or is that part of this group?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Well, we – what we have is a piece of legislation that was passed by the Congress and signed by the President that not only authorizes, mandates us to do that. So that's what we – that's what I was talking about that we're moving to implement.

QUESTION: So how many – when do you expect that to be implemented and how many people do you think that that will –

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: That's precisely what we're in discussion with the Embassy about, in consultation with Homeland Security. We can't say at this stage.

QUESTION: Can you say how many people you have –

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: We built the largest – it was just signed in the last week or so.

QUESTION: But how many people do you have there now working on this issue, working on Special Immigrant Visas?

MR. EDSON: Oh, Special Immigrant – in Baghdad?

QUESTION: In Baghdad.

MR. EDSON: It can't – it's actually – can't be answered quite that – it's a – the referral process is committee-driven and then the consular section would process cases. Almost all these cases were processed out of Jordan, Islamabad for the Afghans, Cairo, you know, Syria, Damascus – the ones that I mentioned before that we've already processed mostly came from third countries.

QUESTION: But didn't Ambassador Crocker write this cable? Like, how long ago was that? That was –

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: September.

QUESTION: September – asking this to be done for all the – offering Special Immigrant Visas for the staffers there?

QUESTION: That's a different program than the refugees.

MR. EDSON: Right. And I believe that cable was mostly suggesting possible changes to legislation. So the program that exists in law was processed in third countries around Baghdad. I don't believe any of those were actually processed in Baghdad. They're beginning slowly now to do cases there.

QUESTION: And to follow up on this law, the new Kennedy legislation, how many people do you think you're going to need in Baghdad processing doing security checks and all of these things?

MR. EDSON: Well, security checks are mostly done here, but we're working out the details of that because that depends so much on who qualifies, who comes forward, and then the sort of moving target of logistics in the region – where people can go for processing. We could set up a capacity and then find out that applicants have chosen to go somewhere else. So we are working on it now.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: If I could just say one thing before another question. Returning to some of Matt's questions a moment ago, I just want to stress that we're certainly not guaranteeing that, you know, we're going to reach 12,000. I mean, there are factors and variables that may make that difficult, and we need to have increased capacity in some places. And it will depend on referrals in a whole number of places. We think we will get them, but it is – there's just no way to, as I said, to guarantee that result.

But getting back to an earlier question, we're not limited by 12,000 either. If we can exceed that, we will be pleased to exceed that. And this is not a numbers issue, in our view. We have a – I believe an obligation to meet the humanitarian needs of this population, and in terms of both assistance and in terms of resettlement. And if whatever number that we do process this year, as I said, ought to be the floor for succeeding years, that will have to be determined. But the capacity will be there because that's what we've been building in the last year.

QUESTION: One thing – I'm Susan Cornwell with Reuters. Did you say that the long-term expectation is that these people would go back home, or is it that they would stay here in the United States? What is the intent or the expectation on that? That's first of all.

And then secondly, when did you say was the – sorry if I misunderstood, but I want to be clear about that. Yeah. Secondly, when was the shutdown in Syria? I think you gave the –

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: June to November.

QUESTION: And you're saying that is a major reason, or the major reason why you think you're seeing these smaller numbers now?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: No, it is a factor. The main reason we've kept the numbers we're getting now is because of the process that we had to go to with – or go through with a number of partners to build capacity in the region, for UNHCR to build its referral capability, for us to – our overseas processing entities to develop a robust processing capability in a number of countries. And those systems are in place and they will generate big numbers later in the year. But the fact that our numbers, whatever they are, would be higher right now in these months is, indeed, related to the fact that we weren't operating in Syria for the better part of 2007, or for a good part

MS. SCIALABBA: Yeah, a couple things I need to say. In terms of people going back, once somebody is here as a refugee, they don't have to go back. They can adjust their status. I think what you were hearing is that people who leave the country and go to relocate within the region –

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Out of Iraq.

MS. SCIALABBA: – out of Iraq, a lot of those people will go back to Iraq or they may settle in the region. You know, stay in Jordan or stay in Damascus, depending on the circumstances. I think –

QUESTION: The people you're letting in under these refugee programs, the expectation is that they will stay in the United States – probably, eventually become citizens?

MS. SCIALABBA: Probably.

QUESTION: Yeah.

MS. SCIALABBA: They'll be permanent residents, and if they choose to become citizens they can become citizens.

QUESTION: Okay.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: I think our – I'm sorry, just in terms of those in the region, our overall policy is to make Iraq safe and stable, and we do believe that most Iraqis want to live in their country and will go home if conditions permit. I'm sorry, Lori –

MS. SCIALABBA: Yeah, I wanted to mention something else about Syria. We couldn't get in to do interviews, that's true. But the OPE was also limited in the visas that they were able to get and their ability to stand up an operation like they did in Amman. Amman is ahead of where Syria is in terms of their ability to pre-screen and start processing these cases so that we can interview them. So the capacity in Syria is lagging behind the capacity in Amman. In Amman, we're pretty much current. With referrals to UNHCR, to the OPE and then to us, we're staying pretty current. But if we interview a case now, it's likely that the person's not going to enter for at least three or four months. And that's just typical in terms of the process and that's half of – that's much less time than it normally takes to admit a refugee. We've collapsed the process quite a bit.

MR. GALLEGOS: We only have a few more minutes left, so why don't we limit it to one or two more questions, then we're going to have to wrap it up.

QUESTION: I just have a question regarding Syria. The history on that – is there – do the politics – because relations between the U.S. and Syria are not very good right now. How does the – is that part of the reason you're having some of the problems in Syria, unlike Jordan, because of the strains between Washington and Damascus?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: It certainly was a reflection of the state of relations. But you probably weren't here at the last press briefing we had at the end of November. We'd come back from a visit to the region. We were in Damascus and met with the authorities there and were able to negotiate the return of our processing program there at the time.

QUESTION: A quick one?

MR. GALLEGOS: A quick one.

QUESTION: Were you saying – I just wanted to check one thing. You were saying that there's a problem with referrals, that you may not get enough referrals?

MS. SCIALABBA: I didn't say that. I said we're current in Jordan.

QUESTION: Okay. But that means that – but with the numbers – so with the numbers being so low, if you're current, that means that pretty much everyone who's – everyone who has been approved has been admitted, or is being – in the process of being admitted, correct?

MS. SCIALABBA: Or in – I mean, they're somewhere in the process. They're somewhere in the pipeline. What I said was UNHCR makes the referral. The OPE handles that referral fairly quickly.

QUESTION: Right. But it's seventy –

QUESTION: How many people are –

MS. SCIALABBA: And then refers it to us.

QUESTION: -- how many people are in the pipeline, did you say?

MS. SCIALABBA: Total, still, right now? There are approximately 9,300 in the pipeline.

QUESTION: Okay. Because you said that – I'm sorry, you're – I'm not sure if this was you, but I was out of town. Your briefing of November 29th, you said that UNHCR had currently referred about 14,000 for processing.

MS. SCIALABBA: Yeah, today I said it's up to about 17,000. We've interviewed 7,700 between FY07 and FY08. That leaves about 9,300 remaining to be interviewed. We're currently in the region scheduled to interview 5,500 of those, and then we pick up – you know, they're still in process. I mean, that 5,500 aren't ready to be interviewed right now, but they will be interviewed within the next – within this quarter. We anticipate that's what we'll interview. And then the rest of these that have been referred, they're probably still in OPE processing. They're getting – they're working their way through the process, and we'll interview those, too.

QUESTION: What's the turndown ratio? How many people are getting turned down?

MS. SCIALABBA: The rates of denial – this is generalized because, generally, when we leave from a circuit ride, it's about 67 percent of the individuals are either approved or conditionally approved. They'll turn into approval eventually. Thirteen percent are denied and about 17 percent are put on hold for various reasons – material support, employment verification, awaiting documentation, they need further research. There's all sorts of reasons. A number of those will turn into approvals and a number of those will turn into denials, and 3 percent are interview no-shows. I don't like to say those are firm numbers because – because of the holds. When they turn into approvals or turn into denials, then we'll – we have a better sense of what's going on. But by the time we're finished with the circuit ride, at least 67 percent of the cases are either approved or conditionally approved.

MR. GALLEGOS: Okay, I want to thank you all. We have another briefing in this room in a few minutes. So those of you who are going to be here for that, it'll be in this

room.

* Normal immigrant visa categories refers to those that have existed since the passage of our current immigration law in 1952.

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