

Senate panel debates security and cost over refugee resettlement program

Republicans question the administration's decision to approve and admit an increased number of refugees in terms of security and cost.

As the nation grapples with an increasing number of possible terrorism-related incidents, a Senate Judiciary subcommittee today grilled the Obama administration on the number of Syrian refugees coming into the U.S.

Senators tied the issue of terrorism to the number of refugees the administration is accepting 110,000, despite officials' insistence that the Syrian refugees go through an extensive screening process.

Sen. Jefferson Sessions, R-AL, said that government leaders need to consult something more than their feelings to help those in need as the country deals with nations in unstable areas of the world.

"The administration presses forward with plans to admit a larger number of unvetted refugees from areas of the world that are producing terrorists and extremists," Sessions said.

The crisis in Syria has let the Obama administration set the refugee ceiling for FY 2017 at 110,000 passing through a refugee resettlement program, created with the passing of the United States Refugee Act of 1980, going into effect Saturday.

In response to Sessions remarks about the country's lack of adequate screenings of individuals admitted to the U.S., Leon Rodriguez, director at the United States citizenship and immigration services, defended his agency by explaining the screening process refugees go through before being admitted into the country.

"All refugees entering our country are subject to the highest level of security check of any category of any traveler to the United States and are admitted only after successfully completing a stringent security screening process," Rodriguez said.

"Since 9/11, not a single act of actual terrorist violence has been committed by a refugee who has undergone our screening procedures," he added.

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-IL, said that refugees shouldn't be the ones held responsible for the security of the U.S., since they go through this enhanced and regular screenings before they set foot into the country. He urged congress to work on strengthening the visa waiver program instead of opposing the number of refugees coming in.

The visa waiver is a program of the United States Government which allows citizens of specific countries to travel to the United States without having to obtain a visa.

“If Republicans are serious about securing our country from threats they should focus on other areas like the Visa Waiver Program,” Durbin said.

Durbin said that most individuals involved in some type of terrorism act are not refugees, but those entering the country through this visa program. “Every participant of a terrorist attack held a passport from a visa waiver program country,”

In addition to the national security implications, the 57% increase in refugees in FY 2017, has committee members concerned about costs. Sessions argued that the U.S. should be open to help those in need, but also has to consider its limits and use its resources wisely.

“When these 110,000 refugees come in, it will cost the country a lifetime cost of \$71 billion and will be a long term financial burden on the taxpayers,” Sessions said.

“We simply cannot do everything for the world, we have to consider the cost to our country as well,” he added.

In lieu of admitting refugees, Sessions proposed establishing safe zones in their home country, that way the U.S. can provide them security in a cost efficient way.

“This way we can provide them protection with the fraction of the cost it will take to resettle them in the U.S.,” he said.

When refugees are resettled in the U.S., they receive help securing housing, receive medical attention and employment assistance, among other services. These services provided to them costs the government quite a lot of money according to Sessions.

“One estimate found that resettling a refugee in the U.S. was nearly twelve times more expensive than providing care for their refugees abroad,” he said.