

International

A family in limbo as US slashes refugee ceiling

Somali boys caught in refugee hold-up

NEW YORK: Somali refugee Ramlo Ali Noor will never be reunited with her 16-year-old son in her new home in Columbus, Ohio. She had been waiting since applying to the US government in 2015 to bring over her three boys from Uganda, but their cases faced hold-ups in refugee processing under the Trump administration. On Sept 22, the youngest of the three teenagers - Abdiiaziz - died suddenly from a brain infection. Now Noor, 37, fears the window for her two surviving sons to make it into the United States is shrinking. The US government plans to slash the refugee ceiling to 18,000, its lowest since the modern refugee program began in 1980.

More than half the places for refugees in the 2020 fiscal year are reserved for Iraqis, Central Americans and religious minorities, leaving only 7,500 for everyone else, according to a White House proposal. President Donald Trump has yet to finalize the refugee number for next year. At the same time - as of this summer - nearly 30,000 refugees had passed resettlement interviews abroad with US Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). Of those, more than 8,800 had been approved for travel, according to a July 2, 2019 State Department report seen by Reuters.

Some of those approved in July have likely been resettled in recent months and the State Department said it could not comment on the current refugee admissions pipeline. But immi-

grant advocates and former officials said it will now be impossible for all of the cases already far-along in the approval process to make it into the country this year. Trump has made curbing legal and illegal immigration a priority. Shortly after taking office, he halved his predecessor Barack Obama's plans to resettle 110,000 refugees in 2017 and has been whittling down the numbers ever since.

Explaining its latest cut, the administration said it must shift resources to processing a backlog of hundreds of thousands of asylum cases, mostly filed by Central American migrants arriving at the U.S.-Mexico border. "The workload with the southern border has been immense in the last couple of years. And yet we are still getting to tens of thousands of asylum cases," Ken Cuccinelli, the Acting director of USCIS, told reporters at the White House on Friday, after the refugee ceiling was announced.

But Barbara Strack, former chief of the Refugee Affairs Division at USCIS, who left the administration in early 2018, said that the low cap "is a policy-driven decision, not a resource-based decision." "These refugees who have already been interviewed and approved could travel to the US over the next 12 months," said Strack, since most of the administrative work on their cases has been completed. "The real issue here is this Administration's desire for lower lev-

els of legal immigration, and their hostility to refugees as part of that flow," she said.

Long separations

Noor's sons are from a previous marriage and their father is not involved in their lives. She has been separated from them since 2010 when she left strife-torn Somalia for Malaysia, where she could apply for resettlement as a refugee with the United Nations. The United Nations refers most refugee cases to the United States and other countries around the world for resettlement, but that route to the United States could become more difficult under the new ceiling according to a presidential document seen by Reuters.

Noor could only afford to travel alone, so left her children with two of their aunts in the hopes of reuniting when she found a new home. Soon after Noor left, one of the aunts was killed and the other injured in a militant attack on a village south of Mogadishu, the boys said in an interview with Reuters and Noor swore in an affidavit to the US government.

Once she was resettled in Ohio in 2015, she applied for her sons to join her. With a job as a home health aide, she was able to pay for them to move to Kampala, Uganda. But since passing a DNA test in 2016 to prove they were her sons, their cases have been stuck. In 2019, she received two requests for additional evidence to clarify incon-

sistencies in their applications, according to documents seen by Reuters.

Two days after her son Abdiiaziz died, Noor received notice from USCIS that all three boys were found to be eligible for reunification pending further medical and security checks, and that their cases were being deferred, a USCIS document showed. "At present, it is impossible to estimate how long it will take to make a determination in your case," the notice said.

The State department declined to comment on specific cases due to privacy considerations. "I follow the news about what is happening," Noor said in an interview through a translator, "and sometimes I hear that Somalia is one of the countries that has been banned, but there is so much up and down that all I can do is pray that they can come." She has two daughters from another marriage now in Ohio, where she has rented a larger place in anticipation of her sons' arrival.

Trump has said stricter standards are needed to vet refugees who potentially pose a security threat from entering the country. In July, he highlighted the arrests of two Somali refugees in Arizona who had sought to travel to Egypt to join Islamic State. "Get smart people!" he said on Twitter after describing the case. Of the 15,600 Somalis in the refugee resettlement pipeline to the United States, only 91 had been approved for travel as of early July. —Reuters

US sizzles in a rare autumn heat wave

WASHINGTON: A freakish heat wave is making early autumn feel like the dog days of summer in much of the southern and eastern United States, with forecasters predicting that temperatures Wednesday could get close to triple digits. Washington hit 97 degrees Fahrenheit (36 Celsius) late in the afternoon, according to the National Weather Service (NWS), surpassing the city's previous monthly record of 96 degrees on October 5, 1941.

The mercury rose into the 90s across much of the south, the NWS said, with Montgomery, Alabama reaching 98 degrees, Little Rock, Arkansas hitting 94 and Atlanta seeing 95 degrees in the mid-afternoon. Temperature tracking in New York's Central Park recorded 92 degrees, just two degrees lower than the city's all-time October high in 1941. Temperatures in some places could be as many as 30 degrees higher than normal, the NWS said, while a quarter of the country will reportedly experience temperatures above 90 degrees.

It's been so bad this week that some schools with no air conditioning in states like Ohio and Maryland are sending children home early or closing altogether. In Tipp City, Ohio, teachers gave kids popsicles and held some classes in shady spots outdoors, NBC affiliate WDTN reported. Records were set or tied Tuesday in more than a dozen cities including Cleveland, Ohio, New Orleans, Louisiana and Syracuse, New York, the Weather Channel reported.

Atlanta could break its all-time October record high of



WASHINGTON: People walk near the World War II Memorial on the National Mall as temperatures are expected to soar into mid-90s in Washington DC. —AFP

95 degrees, it added. Relief is expected late in the week as a cold front rushes in, sending temperatures way down. Some in the Northeast could even see the first frost or freeze of the season. The United States has already experienced extreme weather at the other end of the scale this week, as the northern state of Montana was blanketed with record snowfall - four feet in the town of Browning. And at 8:00 am Wednesday in Billings, Montana's most populous town, it was a lowly 34 degrees. —AFP

Canada PM goes on attack, tries to revive campaign

OTTAWA: Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, trying to revive his electoral fortunes after the emergence of embarrassing photographs, used the first televised campaign debate on Wednesday to launch repeated attacks on his main rival. Polls suggest Trudeau's left-leaning Liberals could lose power to the opposition Conservatives of Andrew Scheer on Oct 21 amid voter unhappiness with images of Trudeau in blackface, as well as other scandals. Trudeau, variously interrupting and talking over Scheer, took the offensive from the start during the French-language debate in the politically important province of Quebec. He first suggested Scheer would be open to reviving the debate on abortion. "Do you - as a party leader, as a father and a husband - believe women should have a choice?" Trudeau asked Scheer. There are few restrictions on abortion in Canada and the Conservatives have traditionally steered clear of the topic, fearing they could alienate progressive voters. "Quebecers can be confident that a Conservative government led by me will not reopen this debate," Scheer responded.

Jagmeet Singh of the left-leaning New Democrats and Yves-Francois Blanchet of the separatist Bloc Quebecois - the other two leaders in the debate hosted by private channel TVA - also criticized Scheer on the issue. "We are seeing that three of us are aligned on values, the values of Quebecers, and we have a fourth, a Conservative party that is not aligned ... on the rights of women," said Trudeau. French is the predominant language in Quebec, Canada's second-most populous province that accounts for 78 of the 338 seats in the federal House of Commons. —Reuters