

More North Korean refugees welcome, State official says

But post-9/11 laws wrongly excluding other asylum-seekers, she says

BY GWYNETH K. SHAW

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WASHINGTON // Assistant Secretary of State Ellen R. Sauerbrey said yesterday that the Bush administration would welcome more refugees fleeing the oppressive regime in North Korea, after several asylum-seekers arrived in the U.S. last month.

Sauerbrey, who has been the State Department's top refugee official since January, spoke at the Heritage Foundation to mark World Refugee Day. She acknowledged the diplomatic challenges posed by North Korean refugees - especially because China has made a practice of sending them home - but said the Bush administration planned to continue efforts to resettle the dissidents in this country.

"We hope to have as many as can find their way," Sauerbrey said.

Six North Korean refugees arrived here last month, the first since the enactment of a 2004 law designed to make it easier to apply for official refugee status. Sauerbrey said she could not discuss potential numbers of refugees or individual cases, citing the sensitive nature of talks with China and other nearby nations.

Sauerbrey, a fixture in Maryland Republican politics who served in the House of Delegates for 16 years and was twice her party's candidate for governor, spoke about a number of other issues involving refugees, from her recent experience visiting camps in Africa to the importance of humanitarian efforts to American interests. President Bush appointed her to lead the Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration this year after her nomination, which was first made last fall, became bogged down in the Senate.

Some of the countries where refugee populations are growing, she said, are also places where terrorist groups are organizing. And when people lose hope, she said, they become vulnerable to recruitment by extremist groups.

"It is not just that we do refugee work because it is the right and moral thing to do," Sauerbrey said. "But it is also in our national interest, and in the interest of national security, to do so."

She also addressed the continuing debate over how to accommodate refugees who should be resettled inside the U.S., but who have been denied because of laws written since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks. Those laws are being used to keep out some refugees who have been accused of providing "material support" to terrorist groups or armed rebels - often, Sauerbrey noted, under duress to simply survive in their home countries.

Sauerbrey said she and others working with refugees are "totally frustrated" that so many people are being disqualified from coming to the U.S. because of these laws. She said that while her office planned for 54,000 refugees to come in this year, it's estimated that the number will be 12,000 to 24,000 fewer because of dubious ties to terrorist groups. She said she thought that several of the agencies involved - including the Department of Homeland Security - would meet soon to hash out a strategy for convincing Congress to revamp the laws.

"I think there is general acknowledgement that without legislation, there will be a group of people who shouldn't be kept out of the country that we can't help," she said after her speech.

George Rupp, head of the International Rescue Committee, which works extensively with refugees, said that if Sauerbrey's estimates are correct, the number of refugees entering the U.S. this year would be close to the low point reached after 9/11. He noted that the Bush administration did grant a waiver recently to Burmese refugees in one camp in Thailand but he added that such case-by-case exemption won't solve the larger issue.

The problem, "is that that is narrowly tailored, and that this is going to affect very large numbers of refugees," he said. "I agree completely that by far the best outcome would be a legislative solution that would fix some of the flaws."

An additional issue, Rupp said, is that Sauerbrey's division faces a money crunch - meaning that even if Congress changes the law, there's simply not enough cash to fund resettlement of all the refugees who want to come to the U.S.

Sauerbrey didn't mention money, except to emphasize how American taxpayers' dollars are being leveraged by the nonprofit groups that carry the bulk of the load of working inside refugee camps, trying to forge a better life for populations made up heavily of women and children.

She said the stories of people fleeing "tyranny, oppression and persecution" echo the history of the founding of this country and told of her visit to a refugee aid center in Providence, R.I., where she ate lunch at a restaurant owned by a woman who fled the Khmer Rouge and has since become a leader in the business community.

"This is the face of the American dream," she said.