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Briefing on Iraqi Refugee Issues

Ambassador James Foley, Senior Coordinator on Iraqi Refugee Issues, Ms. Lori Scialabba, Senior Advisor on Iraqi Refugee Issues at the Department of Homeland Security

On-The-Record Briefing on Recent Trip to the Region and its Results

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(10:15 p.m. EST)

MR. CASEY: Well, I missed you guys at the gaggle today. It's always sad when we don't have those anymore. Oh, well. Anyway, thanks for joining us. Glad to have you all here with us. Matt, I know you're particularly glad to be here today. We did want to take this opportunity to let you hear a little bit of an update of where things stand in terms of our efforts related to Iraqi refugees.

And we have with us today the individual referred to by my dear colleague Mr. McCormack, as a bureaucratic brick breaker which is very hard to say, if you haven't realized that. Anyway, we have Ambassador Jim Foley, our Senior Coordinator for Iraqi Refugees. We also have Ms. Lori Scialabba, his counterpart from the Department of Homeland Security. She's the Senior Advisor on Iraqi Refugee Issues at DHS. Jim, as you know, has been in Syria and traveling around the region a bit, working on some of these issues and it's an opportunity for him to give you an update on some of his travels as well, but also more importantly a chance to give you a better sense of where we stand overall on this issue and the efforts that we're making to try and facilitate the travel of Iraqi refugees.

Let me turn this over first I guess to Lori, who will have an opening statement and then Jim and then we'll go over to questions.

MS. SCIALABBA: Well, good morning. What I wanted to do today was basically start with -- and I don't know how many of you are completely familiar with the refugee process, start with the basic overview of how it works, where we've been and where we're going. I think most of you may or may not know that the PRM, part of the State Department, is responsible for who comes into the refugee program through their cooperative agreements with overseas processing entities and in this case, with Iraq, as it happens to be IOM, International Organization of Migration. They send the referrals to the OPE. The OPE then does the screening. They do data entry. They get the cases ready for then what is

DHS interviews. The OPE also starts the security clearances, SAO class checks that are done. Once we get the cases at DHS, we do the interviews, determine whether or not somebody is eligible for refugee status and determine whether or not they're admissible to the United States. After that's done, the case is then again returned to the OPE. The OPE at that point does out-processing which requires medicals, cultural orientation. An organization is found here in the United States that will resettle the refugees once they arrive in the United States.

UNHCR has currently referred about 13,000* Iraqis to us for processing. I think most people do know also that in March 2007, the OPE's capacity in this region was very limited. We have not traditionally processed a lot of refugees in this region. Traditionally they come from areas such as Africa, East Asia. So what was going on was that the OPE's were having to increase their capacity and build their infrastructure in the region, which is now up and running and running very efficiently and quite well, particularly in Amman.

Processing Iraqi refugees continues to be a priority for DHS, particular for USCIS. As of November 21st, 2007, we've completed approximately 5,600 Iraqi interviews. One point that I do want to make is that there's a difference between cases and interviews. A case can be composed of more than one person. A case can involve as many as five people. So when we talk in terms of cases, it's -- usually the numbers are always going to be smaller than the number of people that we're talking about. I just wanted to make sure everybody understood that.

We are conducting the interviews basically in Jordan, Turkey, Egypt and Lebanon, as well as a small number of other locations. But our primary -- as you know, the primary focus is in Jordan and in Syria. As you also probably know, we were unable to continue interviews in Syria. Our last interview circuit ride was in May. But since then, we've been able to acquire visas. We have a team now in Syria who are processing cases. They're scheduled to do that until December 14th and then we're scheduled to send another team back into Damascus in January, I believe it's January 14th. Another team will be going back in to continue processing.

On average, the total processing time for Iraqi cases is significantly less than other refugee cases worldwide. The average processing time for cases from referral to travel to the U.S. and Jordan is four to six months. That's half of what it takes in most other refugee situations. Obviously, Syria is a little bit different because we haven't been able to get into Syria to do interviews. I should also mention that the OPE was also unable to get visas to send their people into Damascus to also process cases there, to get cases ready for us to do the interviews.

No case is finally approved until all the security checks are completed. However, the security checks that are being run are being done so quickly. They're being completed in a timely manner, as you can see from the fact that the processing time is less than half as it is -- that it is in other refugee cases. We expect, by the end of 2007, that we will have brought in 12,000 -- at least 12,000 Iraqis. One other thing that I want -- pardon?

QUESTION: 2008, you mean?

MS. SCIALABBA: 2008, I'm sorry, you're right. Thank you for correcting me, FY 2008. One other thing that I wanted to mention is the Special Immigrant Visa program. Up to this -- at this point, USCIS has approved 1300 petitions since the beginning of the program in 2006. Total number of applications that have been filed is right around 1500. I think at this point, only 36 have been denied and then the rest of that number is -- are still pending. And that's all that I had for this. I'll let Jim take over.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Thank you, Lori. I have some opening remarks and then I think we'll both step back and be glad to entertain your questions. I just want to put what we've been doing for the last few months in a bit of context. I was named by Secretary Rice to this position in September with instructions to overcome obstacles to the efficient processing of significant numbers of vulnerable Iraqis into the U.S. refugee program and also to resolve several related issues between the Departments of State and Homeland Security. And I think it's fair to say that my appointment reflected Secretary Rice's strong commitment to this vital humanitarian objective, an objective which I believe is important to the American people as well as to our government.

It has been a pleasure working with my counterpart from Homeland Security, Lori Scialabba, as well with the remarkable professionals in the PRM bureau here at State led by Assistant Secretary Ellen Sauerbrey. Clearly, among the goals we have set for ourselves, the Administration's commitment to admitting at least 12,000 Iraqi refugees into the U. S. during Fiscal Year 2008 looms the largest. Ensuring that we will be positioned to achieve this goal has been my principal objective and in this context, I understood, really from the beginning, the importance of addressing the fact that we had been unable, really, since May, as Lori said, to operate our admissions program in Syria. And that's where the overwhelming bulk of Iraqi refugees are located.

Early in this process, though, Lori and I were fortunately able to achieve progress on some outstanding issues between our respective departments. Most importantly, we agreed to implement in-country refugee processing for direct hire U. S. Embassy staff in Baghdad. Second, we also agreed to admit several cases of Iraqi Palestinians into the United States. And this is a group, Palestinians in Iraq, whom UNHCR considered to be perhaps the most vulnerable of all inside Iraq.

That said, most of our initial joint efforts were indeed focused on our preparations for our trip to the Middle East in late October. And as you know, this visit did prove successful in that it yielded agreement with the Syrian Government on resumption of refugee processing in Damascus, which, as Lori said, has already begun.

Before discussing the Syrian visit, though, let me mention a few other highlights from our trip. First, in Baghdad, we met with Ambassador Crocker, with General Petraeus and their staffs. Our main focus was to look at the modalities for implementing the decision I mentioned to process Embassy staff in Baghdad for admission into our refugee program. I think we came away confident that everything is in place to go forward with this process, which should commence in the next month or so. We met with the Embassy's Iraqi staff to explain the program. They are weighing their options now, and I think some of them will undoubtedly avail themselves of this option.

We also met with the Embassy Refugee Committee, and we encouraged the Committee to expand its role as a referral body for potential Iraqi refugees. It has been doing this; we want to expand it, especially on behalf of those Iraqis associated with U.S. and coalition efforts in Iraq.

Finally, in Baghdad I met with Foreign Minister Zebari, principally to urge implementation of the Iraqi Government's pledge of \$25 million in assistance to neighboring countries who are hosting upwards of 2 million Iraqi refugees. We were encouraged by this pledge at the time it was made in April, but frankly have been frustrated since then by the failure of the Iraqi Government to follow through.

The good news is that it would appear now that the Government of Iraq is in discussion with its neighbors on disbursement

of the money. I think there have even been press reports that in one or two cases the money may actually have been transferred. We need to confirm that, but we would indeed view the actual disbursements of the funds to be a positive first step.

I was also pleased by the fact that Foreign Minister Zebari himself characterized the \$25 million pledge as simply an initial step. Given the magnitude of the burden faced by Iraq's neighbors, he felt it was incumbent on the Iraqi Government to do even more. And that is something we are going to continue to encourage. Indeed, it was clear to us throughout our trip in the region that the Iraqi Government's willingness to assist its neighbors, to assist its own citizens, could pay multiple dividends both in terms of improving bilateral ties and also encouraging other potential donors in the region to do their part as well.

Turning now to our visit to Syria, I should say that we had a fruitful and productive meeting with the Vice Foreign Minister, Mr. Mekdad. I saluted the government and people of Syria for their generosity in hosting as many as 1.5 million Iraqis and acknowledged the heavy burden that this represented for the country.

I made the basic argument that we had, or ought to have, a common interest in this matter, first in terms of assuring that the refugees are adequately cared for, and second in terms of seeing a stabilization in Iraq that would permit the safe return of the refugees to their home country.

Naturally, the United States appreciates the decision of the Syrian Government which emerged from our meeting to grant visas to the DHS interviewers and thus allow resumption of our refugee processing in Damascus. As I said in my meeting with Vice Minister Mekdad, we expect that this represents a decision for the long term. Indeed, I suggested that we aim to make a mutual commitment to fence off or otherwise protect our humanitarian cooperation from the other issues in our bilateral relationship.

We also discussed the enormous needs of the refugees in Syria and the considerable cost that Syria itself is incurring in hosting them. And I assured our interlocutors that the U.S. was mindful of those needs and pledged that we would continue to take the lead in contributing to and mobilizing international responses in the area of assistance to Iraqi refugees.

In that regard, I traveled to Geneva from Damascus in order to meet with UNHCR as well as other -- as well as with donor nations to start discussions on assistance requirements for the next year. In fact, assistance questions were uppermost in my mind throughout the trip. In both Jordan and Syria, we met with representatives of NGOs and international organizations to try to get an insight into the living conditions, the evolving living conditions, of refugees in those countries.

I came away with the sense that the needs of refugees will be increasing substantially in the period to come, as will therefore the requirement for international assistance. The bottom line was that this unique urban refugee population, which is quite different from refugee populations elsewhere in the world because it's urban, will be facing increased hardship as the means and the savings that they brought with them from Iraq are depleted over time.

I should note in this respect that the Administration has a request before the Congress for \$195 million in assistance for Iraqi refugees that we hope will be acted upon soonest. In fiscal year 2007, the PRM Bureau provided nearly \$123 million in humanitarian assistance for Iraqi refugees, including \$39 million towards the UN -- the Joint UN Education Appeal and \$18.5 million to ICRC's Iraq appeal. We also gave another \$18.5 million to NGOs providing health, education and

other humanitarian assistance to Iraqi refugees in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

Finally, let me conclude with a comment about the goal I mentioned at the top; namely, to admit up to or at least 12,000 Iraqis refugees into the U.S. this fiscal year. I believe we are on track to achieving that goal, but we are not going to be in a position to substantiate that for a number of months to come. At present, we do not have enough -- we do not have sufficient cases in the pipeline to generate more than perhaps several hundred arrivals per month. This is due largely to DHS's absence from Damascus for virtually the past six months. Thanks though to this recent agreement, we now have indeed ambitious plans to interview Iraqis in the region during the second and third quarters of the fiscal year, and we believe this will result in arrivals of well over one thousand per month in later stages of the year.

So with that, we'd be pleased to take your questions.

MR. GALLEGOS: Go for it, Matt.

QUESTION: Yeah, can I just ask both of you if the Administration still believes it has a moral obligation to assist these Iraqi refugees, particularly those who have worked for the U.S. Government as direct hires or those who have worked as contract workers and their families? And if it does, why is this so slow? You know, the previous examples of massive influxes of refugees, you're looking at almost 200,000 were admitted from Vietnam in nine months. In 1975, you had the situation with the Kurds who were taken en masse to Guam to be processed there. This case, these people are just sitting around and it's like wait and wait and wait in Casablanca. Why is it taking so long?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Do you want to go first? I'd be happy to tackle it first.

MS. SCIALABBA: No, I can go first. I'm not sure there are a lot of people waiting so long. In Amman as well as in Damascus, and obviously in Damascus we had an issue for a while, anyone who's worked -- one of the categories UNHCR is processing is anybody who was affiliated with the U.S. Government. That's one of the categories. That's one of the -- those are the cases that they're referring to us -- some of the cases that they're referring to us.

Anyone in Iraq who feels like that they are in serious danger has been able to go to the Refugee Committee who will then refer them. They do come out of Iraq into generally Amman to be processed at that point. There is a possibility of also having direct access in the -- in Amman to the OPE if you are somebody who was affiliated with the U.S. Government. We aren't seeing large, large numbers of those people. And I -- tell me if I'm wrong -- I think 6 percent of the cases that have been referred to us are USG affiliates -- at least that's the sole claim that they've got. They fit into that category that UNHCR has been referring. But we've also had referrals from the Embassy as well as UNHCR. We're processing all of those cases. And as we said, we're going to start in-country processing for those folks who are working directly for the Embassy.

It was interesting when we met with that group, it was clear to us that they were not sure that they wanted to be involved in the refugee process. I guess they were weighing their options and one of those being the possibility of the SIV. There's legislation obviously pending on that issue also. So we had questions from them and we answered their questions. But it was clear to us they weren't sure that that's the way they wanted to proceed through the refugee process.

Do you want to add something, Jim?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Sure. Thank you. I think actually there -- if I may say, there are probably two parts to the question. One is the question of numbers, of overall numbers, and the other is the question that you mentioned about Iraqis of special interest to the U.S. Is that correct? Can I parse out those two aspects, because --

QUESTION: And also when she speaks about U.S. Government affiliates, what does that mean? Are these -- those are direct hires, right? They're not talking about the contractors, people who --

MS. SCIALABBA: They could be contractors.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: In terms of the numbers -- and you're right -- there are all kinds of -- there's all kinds of commentary about the numbers and whether we ought to be processing more than we are planning to do. I should hasten to add, though, that 12,000 is not -- it's not a cap. It's not a ceiling. It's a goal. And remember, as Lori indicated, that we had to spend considerable time and effort to build the infrastructure in the region that didn't exist at all to process the refugees. And we've accelerated that process down to four to six months. And so it's in place. We didn't have referrals really and we were unable to accommodate them in Syria and we expect this machinery to start functioning, it has, and to start producing significant numbers later in the year. So I think in terms of our goal that, as I said, we're going to be positioned to reach it.

But your question, though, is, is that the right goal? I guess. And I think there are all kinds of analogies that are being drawn that may or may not have applicability to the Iraqi situation at least as it is right now today. Historically around the world in refugee situations -- and we are dealing with quite a number of them and the Administration has a goal of admitting 70,000 with the potential of even 80,000 refugees from around the world and we have to keep that global requirement and obligation in mind. But in all of these cases, including the Iraqi cases, those numbers of refugees who are going to be settled in a third country are a tiny minority of the overall refugee population.

Most refugees find primary asylum in neighboring countries. And the obligation of the international community, and the U. S. has always met that obligation, has been to provide assistance in place. And in the case of Iraq, we are premised on the idea that these refugees will be able to go home. And that certainly is a clear difference in the analogy you raised, for example, with Vietnam where those efforts of a large magnitude were indeed undertaken, but that was after the war -- after the war was over. And we are by no means conceding defeat in that regard in Iraq. On the contrary, we hope indeed to achieve stabilization in Iraq and the conditions under which these refugees can go home.

Now, there are always going to be a percentage, a small percentage of refugees around the world who are deemed vulnerable. The most vulnerable, those who cannot go home for different reasons. And in fact, there are criteria and Lori alludes to them, established by UNHCR to determine which among the refugees are indeed requiring third country resettlement with the U.S., of course, being the leader in receiving refugees for resettlement. These include persons who've been victims of severe trauma -- I'm reading -- detention, abduction or torture, members of minority groups, women at risk, unaccompanied or separated children, dependents of refugees, older persons at risk, medical cases, Iraqis who fled because of their association with the international efforts in Iraq, et cetera. So these are the cases that are determined by UNHCR that require resettlement. These are the ones that are referred to us. And time will tell.

I think our aim, as I said from a virtual standing start, is to be able to process and admit into the U.S. 12,000 this fiscal year. If we can do better than that, we will do better than that. I'm certainly in favor of more if we can do it, but this is pretty

much year one and I want to be sure that we reach our goal and if we do, and if we exceed it, so much the better. If it's a floor and not a ceiling for next year and further years, so much the better.

Your other question, though, I think had to do with which kinds of Iraqis that we want to bring into our program, namely those who have been associated either through direct employment or as contractors, subcontractors, people who have worked for NGOs and media organizations, those who have been really targeted and are at risk and have, in some cases, been killed because of their association with our efforts and our efforts to build a better Iraq. And those are indeed the Iraqis to whom we have the highest obligation.

And I think, just as we will be judged over time by the numbers that we are able to process into the United States, we will also be judged, and I think rightly by the American people, by specifically our ability to make sure that Iraqis who are in danger because they were associated with us have been removed from danger and, if not finding safety in the region, are ultimately able, if deemed, security -- if security is vetted properly, admitted into the U.S. I think that is, indeed, a moral obligation of the United States.

Yes.

MR. GALLEGOS: Arshad.

QUESTION: You know, you referred to this being year one and beginning from what is effectively a standing start. And I realize you were not associated with working on this problem until relatively recently, but why is it, do you think, that the U. S. Government was so slow to make significant and dramatic efforts on this matter? I think that perplexes a lot of people, including Senator Kennedy, who was one of the first major public figures to raise this.

Second, and quite apart from that, just some practical questions on Syria: one, when did the team that is now there and conducting interviews actually get there? How many people are there? How many people do you expect to go back in January? Is there any cap on the numbers? Have you been able -- has the Syrian Government agreed to let in as many people as you would like to send in?

And lastly, you said that you had made a proposal to the Syrians that you mutually agreed to fence off the humanitarian efforts from the many other vicissitudes in the relationship. Did they agree to that or not?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: I think Lori's best placed to answer the second question, so I will defer -- I'm sorry, defer to her on that. On the third question, I put it in my opening remarks the way it happened. I strongly suggested, especially in light of the case that I made that it was in our common interest, really, to be able to deal together with this huge humanitarian burden which they are shouldering and which we want to assist, that -- indeed, that our program be allowed to continue into the future. Time will tell. Time will tell.

QUESTION: They gave you no reason to think that they were disposed to fence it off?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Well, I would like to think that their decision was made in that spirit, that we're going to be in a position to continue to process refugees there. We had to discuss the nature of the program and we had to reach agreement on the parameters of our refugee processing. Those were reached to the satisfaction of the

Syrian Government. They clearly have an interest in burden-sharing. Hosting 1.5 million refugees is extremely costly and those refugees need help and that burden needs to be shared. And clearly, the United States is in a position to address that issue and we intend to.

And so we have a common interest and therefore, I think -- I'm reasonably confident that we are going to be able to continue the program going forward and that the Syrian Government has indeed made such a commitment. But -- your first question?

QUESTION: My first question was, why did it take so long? You know, Senator Kennedy wrote an op-ed in the *Post* in December. That was the first time that I remember there being significant public discussion of this issue. The initial figures were less than a trickle in terms of those that the United States Government was accepting as refugees from Iraq. Why? Why did it take so long? Why are you here now talking about a standing start in year one?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Well, I mean, you're right that I am new to this and so I can't perhaps speak conclusively about the situation prevailing before I arrived.

But my understanding is certainly that this -- that the challenge was a late challenge. This is not a challenge from '03 or '04 or '05, that in -- on the contrary; the movement of refugees was in the other direction in '03 and '04, Iraqis moving back into -- out of the region into Iraq and that it was only after the Samara bombing and then throughout '06 that the huge wave of refugees occurred. And standing start means we did not have in place the mechanisms, the capacity to process these refugees in Syria and in Jordan, and that took some time to stand up -- and that's exactly what we've done.

And finally, I think the other point to make is that -- and this is, I think, also a reference to Matt's question or the analogy with other situations: we have an obligation, especially since September 11th, to apply rigorous screening, security screening to any refugees who aim to enter the United States. This is an obligation we have to the American people so that they have confidence in this program, because their support is critical to this program. Their welcome in communities around America is critical to this program. So that requires a very rigorous and yet streamlined procedure that we have now put in place. But I don't -- I'm not sure that I can accept the premise of your questions, for the reasons I stated. But that said, I think there's no reason to be satisfied, none whatsoever. We have to continue to work at this. And as I said, we aim to bring in significant numbers this year, but that figure is not a cap. We can do better. We will. And if we can build on this in future years, I think that we must do so.

MS. SCIALABBA: Yeah, and if I don't answer one of the questions that you had, just repeat it to me.

Our team was poised in Amman to go into Syria in the hopes that we would get the visas. The visas came through November 19th and the team arrived November 19th. They're all single-entry visas. They're good until December 18th. We don't like to give exact dates of when people are coming in and out, for obvious reasons. Right now, there are five officers there. One of the requirements that the Syrians placed on us is that interviews occur at UNHCR rather than the OPE, the Overseas Processing Entity, which is usually where we do the interviews, so they had to do some reconstruction there for the interview sites. But we are there now and will remain there for some time, and we expect to go back in mid-January. The number of officers we send will depend on how many cases are ready, and that depends on what the OPE is able to get ready for us to do interviews on (inaudible) Geneva.

QUESTION: And the one other question was did the Syrians place any limitations on the number of visas that you could request or the number that they were disposed --

MS. SCIALABBA: They didn't say that. We have -- they didn't say that and we didn't really discuss it. Our hope is that whatever we're asking for at this point, they will give to us.

QUESTION: You just asked for five and you got the five?

MS. SCIALABBA: Yes, yes.

QUESTION: And do you plan to ask for five in January or --

MS. SCIALABBA: It depends. It depends on the number of cases that are ready for interview, and that'll vary.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MS. SCIALABBA: I guess that one thing I should point out, too, is that the OPE was having the same problem we were in terms of getting their staff into Syria to get cases ready for us to interview, so they also had the delays that we had in terms of getting cases ready.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: I'd like to add just one other point and then come to the next question, which is that it's by no means an easy challenge for us to meet the 12,000 goal, not only because we were out of business in Syria for so long and we have to play catch-up there, which we've started to do, but the numbers of -- let me put it this way. As I said, UNHCR seeks the most vulnerable, those who require third-country resettlement. And in the case, for example, of Jordan, where it's estimated that there are probably around 500,000 Iraqi refugees in the country, only 50,000 have registered. Only 50,000 have even registered with UNHCR. And out of those, what's the number that have been referred to us, referred for third-country settlement?

MS. SCIALABBA: (Inaudible) I don't know. To us, it's probably around six or seven** by now.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: And it's unclear to what degree, for example, in Jordan, UNHCR will be able to -- would be able to dramatically increase those referrals. Now, that said, I think we and UNHCR are committed to ensuring that we do the maximum to find out if there are other worthy cases that could be referred to us. For example, UNHCR -- of the 50,000 that registered, the first 20,000 were registered before, in '07, we had this capacity in place to receive referrals. So we've asked them to go back to that original 20,000 and we think there are probably cases that could be referred to us. So we're anxious to find that out.

We've also suggested that they conduct some kind of public information campaign because we do believe that there are probably cases out there, including cases of special interest to us. You may have noted recent press reports about, for example, Iraqi contractors who seem to be in Jordan, and we've sent out additional staff ourselves. We're going to reach out. We have, I think, the capability of providing advice to refugees in Jordan, for example, who might qualify for the program, might qualify for UNHCR referral or possibly direct access to our program. So we're going to be increasingly proactive on this front.

But just to say -- this is not "snap your fingers" and here's 12,000, let alone more. It is going to be a -- it will require a concerted effort month in, month out between now and the end of the fiscal year to reach our goal.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) the number that was six or seven, literally, or six or seven thousand?

MS. SCIALABBA: Thousand.

QUESTION: Thank you.

MR. GALLEGOS: Sylvie.

QUESTION: You spoke earlier about a program that will commence in the next months or so in Baghdad. If I well understood, it's the (inaudible) program. Is it -- I don't understand why it's -- you start that so late in Baghdad since you have been in Baghdad and with a huge organization.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: You ask a very important question because having just alluded to the fact that it's not a given that we're going to get dramatic increases in referrals, although I think we do indeed hope that as we continue to resume our operations in Syria that the referrals will certainly pick up again there. This does beg the question as to where, for example, Iraqis of interest to us, those who are associated with U.S. efforts, are. Because they have had opportunities, especially in Jordan, to come forward, to be either referred by UNHCR or to even present themselves to our OPE at least for information. And we've not seen a lot of that.

And I think that it is possibly the case that quite significant numbers of them are still inside Iraq. And so that is a conundrum -- and I'm getting to your specific questions -- a conundrum because frankly, the security situation until now has made it really very difficult to contemplate doing this refugee processing inside Iraq. And it is a process that requires several months, as we said, four to six months; a number of steps, a number of interviews in the prescreening area and then ultimately, in the adjudication area; requires fingerprinting and photographs and interviews with family members and a whole series of steps that take time. And to do this in the security circumstances that prevailed, that have prevailed in Iraq, seemed daunting to say the least.

And so, you know, we did agree, and I headlined this at the beginning, to take, I think, a significant step. And we are, you know, grateful to Homeland Security for agreeing to begin this process in Baghdad as far as our Embassy staff are concerned. It was an important step and I think we were there on the ground, we were able to assure ourselves that we can conduct this safely. And by safely, I mean for the refugees, principally, the applicants.

Now this does beg the question, though, about, you know, the -- as I indicated, the fact that we believe that there are lots of Iraqis who -- or were -- some way associated with our efforts who are still in the country, and how to access them is a challenge. And we're going to have to continue to think about this and to think about whether we can do more in the country if and when security circumstances do permit that. So it's not something that we rule out. It's something that we have to think about. But it's something that is certainly challenging.

I did note, though, and I think Lori echoed that, though, that while we were in Baghdad, we did meet with the

Embassy Refugee Committee and they are a referral body and we encouraged them, sort of, to expand their -- the scope of their work. We offered to increase their capacity to do so and to the extent that they can refer Iraqis associated with us, not merely direct hire staff, but those who are contractors or others, you know, who need resettlement, we've encouraged them to do so.

Yes. Sorry, Gonzo.

MR. GALLEGOS: I'll call on Michel.

QUESTION: Yes. We knew that hundreds or thousands of Iraqi are returning back to Iraq from Syria. How does it then -- will affect your plans or programs in the numbers of visa you will give to these people?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Well, as far as Syria is concerned, we think that there are upwards of 1.5 million refugees there. That is a huge number and so we don't see that challenge, that burden going away anytime soon. Certainly, we are mindful that something is happening in recent weeks, something with potential interest, the fact that numbers of Iraqi refugees, principally out of Syria, are returning home. I think it's important to get a handle on that in terms of why this is happening and what happens to them when they go back and the capacity of the Iraqi Government to take care of them, the possible requirements for the international community to support that effort, but also the reasons for which Iraqis may be leaving Syria.

I think we've seen press reports that some have cited improving security conditions and that's what we are aiming for overall in Iraq, is to create those conditions durably that allow refugees to go home safely and with long-term confidence. But we are also aware, and certainly heard this when we were in Damascus, that there are push factors at work as well. I alluded to this, the fact that the refugees we were able to observe are increasingly depleting their resources and some also are out of status and concerned about their ability to stay on in countries of asylum. And so, as I said, there is a push factor pushing them back into the country.

With the figures we've seen, and we can't sort of corroborate them though, but indicate that there are continued flows out of Iraq while the flows into Iraq from Syria exceeded those flows though in, apparently, recent days.

Yes.

QUESTION: (Inaudible) returns that we're seeing. Do you have specific programs to help these people when they return or are you -- do you regard this as now the responsibility of the Iraqi Government?

MS. SCIALABBA: Before we answer that, I wanted to clarify one thing. We don't give visas. The refugee program isn't a visa program and it doesn't go through the embassies. It starts generally with UNHCR referrals, then into our program, then through the OPE, then they're processed as a refugee and they come to the United States as a refugee. It's not -- it's a distinction that I think is important to make. The Special Immigrant Visa program is a visa program. When the person gets the visa and comes to the United States, they get a permanent resident card immediately, whereas a refugee can adjust after a year.

I'm sorry.

MR. GALLEGOS: We have time for a couple more questions. So we have Nina and then (inaudible).

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Yeah, I think we're going to be talking to the Iraqi Government about this. As you know, this is very recent, but they seem to be organizing in some sense convoys out of Damascus and we believe there are financial incentives as well that the Iraqi Government has provided. But their capacity really to absorb and ensure the well-being of these refugees is something that we need to discuss with them.

QUESTION: So these are government-organized convoys bringing people back?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Yes, that's my understanding. Yes.

MS. SCIALABBA: My understanding from State Department is that there is a carryover of \$27 million from '07 into '08 for internally displaced Iraqis and that a request has been made -- and someone can correct me from the State Department if I'm wrong -- for \$80 million from Congress for internally displaced Iraqis, which is separate and apart from what Jim mentioned earlier, the earlier request that had been made.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: I was referring to PRM assistance for refugees outside the country. This is largely a USAID purview.

QUESTION: I just wanted to ask -- get a clarification. How many people have been admitted so far through the program? I know that the goal is 12,000 by fiscal year 2008. And then also, do you have a number -- do you have a cost estimate how much it's going to support the refugees that are there? And the third question is do you have goals in terms of admitting refugees after '08?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Well, we can get you the statistics, especially the end-of-month statistics, I guess by tomorrow or the weekend. In terms of '08, your last question, this is a presidential determination in terms of worldwide admissions goals and targets, and we wouldn't be in a position to sort of anticipate what they might be. But we have the capacity in terms of the President's stated goal to increase beyond 12,000 because for the region we defined 28,000 as the goal. So that's not an impediment in itself. As I said, we would like to really not only reach the 12,000 but exceed it if we can. It really is a question of the pipeline though, as I've indicated, which took a substantial hit earlier this year.

What was your second question?

QUESTION: The second question was on the cost estimate. You were talking about the 25 million, the money that the U. S. has given. But ultimately, do you have some cost estimate of how much it's going to take to support these people?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: To support them in place in Syria and Jordan over the next year?

QUESTION: Yeah.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Richard, we have -- there is an estimate -- I think there was an estimate. The question is whether circumstances that I described will increase the requirements over the coming months. And I frankly, when I was

in Geneva, spoke directly to this with UNHCR, asked them to do an update. And I think we're going to be getting their appeal for Iraq in '08, Richard – would it be in December or early January that we expect that.

But I think the original assessment was that for international organizations and NGOs would be about \$685 million for '08. And as I indicated, the President has a request up on the Hill now for a U.S. contribution of \$195 million. But as I indicated though, I certainly came back from the region with the sense that the needs are growing, and so we look to UNHCR for its formal appeal to come in the next month or two.

MR. GALLEGOS: We've got time for one more.

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Charlie.

QUESTION: Yeah. Can either one of you from your study of the situation give us an idea of the number you're looking at long term; that is, have you asked the Embassy how many Iraqis and their family members are there in this pool who have worked for the Embassy or worked for American contractors? Do you know what you're looking at long term?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: The short answer is we don't have a sort of scientific number as to

what that pool might include of Iraqis who were associated directly or indirectly with U.S. and international efforts in Iraq. And we believe it's in the tens of thousands, but it could be a range and it could be in the low tens, but that is decidedly unscientific. You know, I don't think we know what that is precisely.

QUESTION: And in that tens of thousands -- include family members or is that --

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Yes, yes, yes.

QUESTION: And how many --

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: It's not -- we don't believe -- it's hundreds of thousands. Let me put it that way. It's somewhere in the tens, but that's a very, very rough estimate.

QUESTION: And in that pool, you roughly estimated how many have been allowed to come to the United States so far -- those with special connections to the United States?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Well, as I indicated, UNHCR has a range of criteria by which they refer refugees to us for resettlement. And this is one of the criteria, but they are referred with multiple criteria. At the same time, we have the capacity to afford direct access to certain Iraqis who work for us directly or who served as interpreters, translators. We can get you those figures, the numbers who came in in fiscal year '07 and that will continue into '08. But it's hard, I think to give you a scientific number right -- at least right now from the podium.

QUESTION: Can I ask you two very brief numbers questions? You mentioned one, Jim, that you said that several Palestinians had been admitted to the United States. How many is that?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: I believe the total figure is nine. There were three cases. Is that --

MS. SCIALABBA: At this point, yes.

QUESTION: Nine Palestinians. I believe there are about 15,000 Palestinians in Iraq right now. What does this say about the whole process -- nine out of -- I don't know how many have been referred to the U.S. or if any of them have been. But that number doesn't -- and at the same time and I understand there's special security considerations given Iraq and its policies. But you know, at the same time, this is taking so -- this process trudges along for the Iraqis, DHS is interviewing and accepting, approving thousands of Iranians whose country is arguably less friendly to the United States.

MS. SCIALABBA: Yeah. Let me clarify. DHS doesn't determine who comes into the refugee process. We do the interviews when the people are referred. The Palestinians you're talking about are the ones that UNHCR referred. We will review Palestinian referrals on a case-by-case basis.

QUESTION: Right. How many there have been?

MS. SCIALABBA: Pardon. That's how many UNHCR has referred to us at this point.

QUESTION: They've only referred --

MS. SCIALABBA: Referred into the U.S. refugee program at this point. Now, we're working on asking them to make some more referrals, but we do them on a case-by-case basis.

QUESTION: You accepted 100 percent of the Palestinians referred to the United States.

MS. SCIALABBA: You know, I don't want to say that.

****STAFF:**** There were 13 and one family of four, I think was found -- a resident of Jordan or something like that. They were --

QUESTION: Okay. And on the other question, can you talk about why the Iranian numbers are so high, comparatively?

MS. SCIALABBA: That's a program that's been in place for quite some time. We don't process in Iran obviously. They come out. I think most of them are processed through Vienna. And I believe the majority of them are probably minority -- religious minorities.

****STAFF:**** They all are.

MS. SCIALABBA: They all are. They're all religious minorities.

****STAFF:**** (Inaudible) special legislation, the Specter Amendment that basically reduced the adjudicatory standards for religious minorities from Iran.

QUESTION: Right. Okay, so you need to wait for special legislation for Iraqi -- for special cases for Iraqis?

****STAFF:**** No. You mean religious minorities?

QUESTION: I don't know. I just found it very difficult to get my head around the fact that you have a refugee -- a universe of refugees out there of, you know, 2.-something million and 13,000 have been referred and you've accepted a little over 2,000 since the beginning of fiscal --

****STAFF:**** (Inaudible) have arrived. Accepted is different from arrived.

QUESTION: So a little over 2,000 maybe have arrived in the United States in the past 14 months.

****STAFF:**** The process didn't start --

QUESTION: No, go ahead.

****STAFF:**** -- I mean, the High Commissioner for Refugees was here in this very room in mid-February and -- well, along with Paula Dobriansky -- and that's basically when this program was announced and began. UNHCR was not referring large numbers of Iraqis to any country for resettlement prior to early 2007. The situation changed, you know, the Samara bombing events or violence on ethnic groups and all that led UNHCR to conclude that they needed to do something on the resettlement side for the growing number of Iraqis that were coming out, especially those who were vulnerable. Their goal was to register 200,000 people in the region in calendar 2007 and to refer 20,000 of them to all resettlement countries for consideration. And of that number, we will get probably around three quarters by the end of the calendar year. We received about 14,000 so far. We assume we'll get another thousand or so before the end of December.

And so -- and as has been explained, there was no infrastructure in place. This is not a visa where people go to the U. S. embassy to apply for refugee status. It's a referral. It's done by a completely different set of USG personnel. It's not consular officers who do this. There were none in Jordan or in Syria when this program was announced. So we needed to identify space -- you know, they had to hire and train staff and all of that so really in earnest the interviews didn't begin anywhere in the region, with the exception of Turkey, because Turkey had an established presence. But other than that, until the first visit to Syria in May and then Jordan followed in June, so that's really when the interviews began.

QUESTION: And what's the number of DHS people who are stationed permanently in the region dealing with this process?

MS. SCIALABBA: We don't do permanent -- we rotate in and out. As the cases are ready, we send teams in to do the interviews. We're current, particularly in Amman. Obviously we're a little behind in Syria, but we anticipate becoming current with the next circuit ride in Syria. I don't think we're behind in any other country either in terms of our interviews. And when Terry talks about interviews, they're not just the DHS interviews. The OPE has to do the preparation process first before we get to our interview process, which usually takes, you know, some time also. I don't

-- we're not lagging far behind in terms of the DHS interviews. We're doing them pretty much as they become available.

QUESTION: Could you address all the questions about how many people got in U.S. since the beginning of the year?

****STAFF:**** I think they said they would provide you with the statistics.

QUESTION: Can you get us the monthly statistics through October today?

QUESTION: Can we get that?

AMBASSADOR FOLEY: Yes, we'll get that to you after the briefing.

QUESTION: You just (inaudible) five people in Syria, but how many do you know in Jordan -- DHS doing interviews?

MS. SCIALABBA: I think there are four in Jordan at this point. We had double team in Jordan up until the time -- because we were waiting to get into Syria, which allowed us to keep almost current with what the OPE was getting ready for us to do interviews. We were doing them almost simultaneously as they got them ready. Then the other team went into Syria. So I think there are four in there right now.

****STAFF:**** (Inaudible) six.

MS. SCIALABBA: Maybe up to six now, because then we backfilled behind that group also.

QUESTION: Could you explain what's the interview process? In other words, you talk about fingerprinting and then talking to the neighbors. Who does that? Does OPE do that and then what do you do?

MS. SCIALABBA: The OPE doesn't do the fingerprinting. We generally send someone in to do the fingerprinting and in the interview process, it depends on what the case is, how many people are involved in the case. The officer will talk to them about their claim and ask them questions about their claim, ask about any information that may have come up through checks that weren't revealed in the story that they initially told the OPE.

Part of what we do too is look at what the claim was before UNHCR, what the claim was before the OPE, what they're telling us when they sit down to talk to us. That's in terms of determining whether or not they're actually a refugee. And then we also have to make the determination on whether they're admissible to the United States.

QUESTION: Aren't there any standards -- security standards that -- you know, Jim talked about the rigorous procedures since 9/11. What are those procedures? I mean, are there any criteria that officers look when they interview those people and -- in terms of security to make sure that they're not a threat to the United States?

MS. SCIALABBA: Well, yes, and the basic criteria that we'll look at is, are they admissible to the United States. There are inadmissibility grounds that are around some security issues, but there are other inadmissibility grounds that could come into play whenever you do an interview that you discover at that time. It's not just security. It could be other issues.

MR. GALLEGOS: Last question, Libby.

QUESTION: I'm just wondering, how many -- the numbers of people that do the interviews, four and five you said in the different countries, that seems like a small amount of number. How many interviews are they doing per month, say? I mean, if they're going to be in a series of --

MS. SCIALABBA: One officer -- in terms of Iraqi refugees, one officer can do four interviews a day, but as I said, an interview doesn't mean one person. I mean, four interviews a day could be 20 people, it could be eight, it could be any amount of -- you don't know. It's a case composition. We try to staff the circuit rides with as many officers as we need to to complete the cases that are ready for interview. So leaving somebody in the region when there aren't any cases ready to interview doesn't make any sense for us.

MR. GALLEGOS: Thank you.

* 14,000

** around six or seven thousand

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