

U.S. Officials Admit Delays in Issuing Visas to Iraqis

THE NEW YORK TIMES

July 24, 2007

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WASHINGTON, July 23 — Bush administration officials said Monday that they were trying to help Iraqis working for the American Embassy in Iraq to immigrate to the United States, but they also conceded that a gap remained between American words and actions on the issue.

Efforts to assist Iraqis who work for the embassy have vaulted to the top of an informal State Department priority list at a time when the United States is struggling to respond to the ever growing number of refugees seeking to flee sectarian fighting. Many of those employees run the risk of being the targets of various militias because of their association with the American government.

As of June 30, the United States had admitted 69 locally employed Iraqis on “special immigrant visa” status this year, with 93 more cases pending, State Department officials said. But that status, as defined by Congress, can be applied only to interpreters and translators, which excludes a range of Iraqis, from drivers to soldiers.

State Department officials said they were working with Congress and the Homeland Security Department to accelerate the processing of immigrant visas and grant refugee status to the American Embassy’s local employees in Iraq. As first reported Sunday in The Washington Post, Ryan C. Crocker, the United States ambassador to Iraq, sent a cable to Washington on July 9 pressing the administration to issue immigrant visas to all Iraqis employed by the American government.

Administration officials said that Mr. Crocker’s sentiments were widely shared in the State Department, and that the administration had been working with Congress and the Department of Homeland Security to try to work through the backlog of immigration requests. “Everybody has the same concern here,” said Sean McCormack, the State Department spokesman. “They want to take care of the people with whom they work on a daily basis — those of whom might feel under threat.”

A senior administration official said, though, that “sometimes in government, as in any large organization, there is a lag between intent and the output of a program.”

Employees not eligible for the special immigrant visas have been left to try to get to the United States through a “refugee” category. The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has referred 8,295 Iraqis who were locally employed by

Americans to the United States for processing, but as of Monday, the Department of Homeland Security had interviewed only 2,368 of them, administration officials said.

“The tie-up is Homeland Security and vetting,” said James Zogby, head of the Arab-American Institute. “They’re arguing that working for the U.S. is one thing, trusting them over here is another.”

Senator Edward M. Kennedy, Democrat of Massachusetts, has introduced a bill that would establish an immigrant visa program for all Iraqis who have worked for the United States government, including the military, for at least a year.

In a statement on Monday, Senator Kennedy said that divisions in the Senate over the war in Iraq “shouldn’t obscure the fact that all of us on both sides of the aisle agree that America owes an immense debt of gratitude to these Iraqis, and we have a special responsibility to help them.

“They’ve supported our effort, saved American lives and are clearly at great risk because of it.”

The effort to allow more Iraqi employees to resettle in the United States is symptomatic of a larger problem of Iraqi refugees that experts expect to get worse in the months to come. The United Nations estimates that some two million Iraqis have left for Syria, Jordan and other neighboring countries; 60,000 more flee Iraq every month.