

REFUGEES WISH MORE FOCUS ON SYRIA, LESS ON CLOSING US DOORS

KANSAS CITY: Ahmad Alabood, whose family was the first to be resettled in America as part of the "surge" refugee program, wishes President Donald Trump would help topple Syria's regime rather than press to close off US borders to those fleeing a torn homeland. "The Syrian people deserve better than this," Alabood, 48, who along with his wife and five children arrived last spring in Kansas City, Missouri, told The Associated Press through a translator Friday.

The sentiment was shared some 550 miles away by Motaz Alafandi, a 49-year-old Syrian living in Dallas while seeking asylum with his wife and three youngest kids, ages 14, 11 and 5. "I wish that Mr President (Trump) can help in stopping the war in Syria," said Alafandi, who said he loves the US and the American people but does hope to return one day to his homeland. "If my country will become good again, I won't stay here."

New vetting measures

Such laments about Syria - reeling from a civil war that has spawned hundreds of thousands of refugees - come as Trump on Friday signed an executive order imposing "new vetting measures" that he says are

aimed at keeping "radical Islamic terrorists" out of the United States, saying "we don't want them here." Trump said he only wants to admit people to the US who will support the country. Among the order's directives are that the US stop issuing visas to Syrian nationals and halt the processing of Syrian refugees until security changes are made, and suspend all immigration from countries with terrorism concerns for 90 days.

It was unclear which countries would be affected, though a draft of the order obtained by The Associated Press pointed to a legal provision identifying Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen, all majority-Muslim countries. The city of Rutland, Vermont, had planned to welcome 100 refugees from Syria and Iraq, but with Trump's Friday order the community expects to see only the two Syrian families that arrived this month.

Ahmed Khatib, 37, said he, his wife Mahasen Boshnaq, and their three young children arrived there Jan. 19, and in a Friday interview he said they feel lucky. Day by day they are settling in and Khatib has started talking with people about getting work. After studying agricultural technology in college he hopes to finish his degree in

the US Khatib said he looks forward to being self-sufficient, working, having a home for his family and school and clothing for his children. He doesn't think Trump's opinion reflects Americans, who he said want to allow refugees in the country.

Anti-Muslim hostility

"They are very nice and they are very helpful and welcoming," Khatib said. "I care about what the America people want and I feel that they want refugees." Alabood said restricting the flow of refugees into the US - out of concern that waves of refugees haven't been or can't be properly vetted by the US to weed out the terrorism-minded - could deepen American suspicion and fan anti-Muslim hostility. Critics of the proposed moves have labeled them reckless and un-American. "There are certain (American) people that would take it to an extreme" and lash out, said Alabood, a former construction worker in his homeland. "There are lots of people in desperate need of help, and this is a great country to help them," he added.

Afghans and Iraqis who have worked as interpreters for the US military fear the executive action that will bring sweeping changes to the nation's refugee policies will

mean their families will be stuck in their homelands, where they may be targeted for violence because they have worked for the Americans. Recently arrived interpreters accompanied by military veterans and elected officials gave a news conference in San Diego on Friday, asking President Trump to not close the doors to refugees. Abdul Manan, 31, an Afghan interpreter who worked for the Army and special forces for eight years, arrived in San Diego two months ago.

Fears, death threats

He fears for his family after fleeing his homeland amid death threats. It took him three years to get out on a special immigrant visa but his relatives remain in his village and have been threatened. Manan suggested Trump talk to the military and veterans who will attest to the risk interpreters took to help troops. "They have sacrificed their lives and their family's lives and now they are left behind. I think of the history of America. Is that how they do? If someone helps them and they're left behind, they're at the mercy of the terrorists - ISIS."

Since settling in Missouri nine months ago, Alabood has chased the American

dream, albeit in baby steps. He's earning \$10.25 an hour making plastic car parts, trying to learn English and has a four-bedroom rental home to go along with his donated 2000 minivan. His \$725 monthly rent tab leaves him unable to afford health insurance. Yet he gushes of the graciousness of Kansas City, saying he's not been subjected to anti-Muslim sentiment in the Midwest. His brother has joined him, arriving in Kansas City five months ago with his three kids, ages 8, 6 and 4.

In Dallas, Alafandi enjoys a temporary protected status, which has allowed him to get a work permit and driver's license. Alafandi, who came with his family to the US in 2014 and awaits word on his asylum application, has a tow truck business. "Sometimes we feel that everybody is against us," fostering a feeling of being unwelcomed, he said. "Our people are killed in Syria, and when they try to find a way to survive, people are kicking them out and dealing with them badly." "I wish that we will be treated as a human beings that are seeking shelter and are seeking to be secure with our families," he added. "We are just asking to be safe and find jobs and feed our kids." — AP

News

in brief

Czech leader Zeman backs Trump's anti-migrant steps

PRAGUE: A spokesman for Czech President Milos Zeman yesterday praised Donald Trump's anti-migrant steps, saying the new US president simply cared about the safety of Americans. "US President Trump protects his country, he's concerned with the safety of his citizens. Exactly what EU elites do not do," Zeman's spokesman Jiri Ovcacek said in a tweet. In office for a week, Trump on Friday signed an order to boost the vetting of potential immigrants and refugees, seeking to keep "radical Islamic terrorists out of the United States of America." The move has sparked criticism among rights groups as well as at the United Nations which called on the US to continue its long tradition of welcoming refugees. The pro-Russian Zeman, a 72-year-old veteran leftwinger and ex-Communist, who endorsed Trump before the election last year, has criticized immigration from Muslim countries. He once called the wave of refugees "an organized invasion" and said Muslims were "impossible to integrate."



Czech President Milos Zeman

Bangladesh rail hero dies saving mother, daughter

DHAKA: A Bangladesh railway employee was hit and killed by a train after saving a mother and daughter from being run over, an official said yesterday. Railroad maintenance worker Badal Mia, 58, was on duty in the capital Dhaka on Friday when he noticed a woman and five-year-old girl trying to cross the track as an inter-city train approached them at full speed, divisional railway manager Arif-uz Zaman said. "Mia jumped and pushed them away from the track, he managed to save both of them. But he was run over by the train as he tried to jump away from the track," Zaman said. "He died on the spot. It's shocking for us to lose a colleague like this but Mia has set an example of gallantry and true heroism," he said. The father of eight was only a few months away from his retirement, local media reported. Last month a 50-year-old railway lineman also risked his life by dragging a man off the track a moment before a train approached. He was rewarded by the authorities.

Father, son 'guilty' of shackling, raping girl

TOLEDO: Jurors convicted a father and his adult son Friday of raping and shackling a teenage relative who escaped their basement by hiding a spare key and using it to unlock her handcuffs. Timothy Ciboro and his 28-year-old son, Esten Ciboro, were found guilty on charges of rape, kidnapping and child endangering. Both men had denied abusing the girl, who is now 14, and a 9-year-old girl who also testified that she had been sexually abused by the father and son. Esten Ciboro, who along with his father served as his own attorney, told jurors during his closing argument Friday that they needed to do the right thing and "reunite this family and end their suffering." The older girl testified earlier this week that she was forced to stay in the basement for varying lengths of time as punishment or when the men left the house and that she was allowed out to shower or use the restroom. Officers found leg irons in the basement along with a bucket the girl said she used as a toilet, according to a police report.

Missing activists return home safely in Pakistan

ISLAMABAD: A Pakistani university professor who went missing earlier this month has returned home safely, police and a family member said yesterday. Senior Islamabad police officer Ashraf Shah said that Salman Haider was home, on the outskirts of the capital, Islamabad, late Friday night and that he is safe and well. Haider and three other rights activists who ran social media accounts known for their liberal views went missing earlier this month. Dr Haider Ashraf, the Lahore police chief, said all four missing men were at an Islamabad police facility, but would not elaborate on their circumstances. Family members of the other three men returned could not immediately be reached for comment. Shah said Haider has not yet given a statement to police about his disappearance. Haider's brother Zeeshan also confirmed his elder brother's return, but would not give any further details. Haider disappeared on Jan 6, and his wife received a text message from his phone telling her to collect his car from a roadside on the outskirts of Islamabad.

BRITAIN'S MAY WOOS TURKEY FOR TRADE, PRESSES ON RIGHTS

UK PM SEEKS STRONGER TIES AFTER BREXIT VOTE

ANKARA: British Prime Minister Theresa May yesterday promised steps to ramp up trade between Turkey and Britain ahead of Brexit but also urged Ankara to uphold human rights following a failed coup. On her first visit to Turkey as premier and fresh from meeting new US President Donald Trump at the White House, May held three hours of talks with President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. May sought to strike a delicate balance between showing Britain's keen interest in expanding trade with Turkey following the June vote to leave the European Union while echoing European alarm over the scale of the crackdown after the July 15 attempted coup.

May announced the creation of a joint group to boost trade ahead of Britain's departure from the EU and also oversaw the signing of a deal for Britain's BAE Systems to develop a new Turkish fighter jet. May said after meeting Erdogan at his palace she was "proud" Britain had stood with Turkey's democratically-elected government when the coup struck. But she added: "Now it is important that Turkey sustains that democracy by maintaining the rule of law and upholding its international human rights obligations, as the government has undertaken to do."

May stressed that Turkey was one of Britain's "oldest friends" with relations going back over 400 years, referring to the establishment of relations between the Ottoman Empire and England under Elizabeth I. Earlier, a spokeswoman countered criticism from some MPs that Britain was cosying up to Turkey while turning a blind eye to its human rights record. The spokeswoman said: "I don't think there are any issues that the prime minister is afraid to bring up."

Around 43,000 people are under arrest on charges of links to the coup bid, which Ankara blames on the US-based preacher Fethullah Gulen. He denies the charges. May's visit is also seen as the first to Ankara by a major Western leader since the attempted putsch, although then US vice president Joe Biden held talks with Erdogan in August. Her visit came hours after Erdogan had hosted the American actress Lindsay Lohan - a keen supporter of



ANKARA: Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (right) and British Prime Minister Theresa May speak after their meeting at the presidential complex in Ankara yesterday. — AFP

Erdogan's vision of a multipolar world - in his vast presidential palace in Ankara.

'Post-Brexit trading relationship'

Erdogan said the two sides were targeting increasing annual trade from over \$15 billion to \$20 billion. Meanwhile, May said Britain and Turkey have agreed to set up a working group to "prepare the ground for our post-Brexit trading relationship" after Britain leaves the European Union. "We both want to build on our existing links and I believe that doing so will be to the benefit of both of our countries and for the prosperity of both our nations," she said.

Under a non-binding agreement, BAE Systems and state-owned Turkish

Aerospace Industries (TAI) will establish a partnership for the development of the TF-X fighter jet. May said it indicated that "Britain is a great, global, trading nation and that we are open for business," after the Brexit vote. She added that "it marks the start of a new and deeper trading relationship with Turkey." The initial phase is worth over £100 million, Downing Street said. But the agreement can pave the way for further deals potentially worth billions of pounds over a 20-year lifespan, May's spokeswoman told reporters.

'Unsavory rulers'

Back in the UK, some MPs have urged May not to let her focus on trade overshadow

human rights concerns over the crackdown in Turkey. "The Conservative Brexit government is so desperate for trade deals with anyone but the mature democracies of the European Union that even the most unsavoury rulers are to be subjected to the prime ministerial charm," opposition Liberal Democrat MP Sarah Olney wrote in the Guardian newspaper.

Erdogan and May also discussed the battle against jihadists in Syria and efforts to reunify Cyprus, where both Ankara and London are guarantor powers, as well as aviation security. "I am pleased with the steps we have taken and I believe in the continuation of this success in the future," Erdogan said after the talks. — AFP

AMID YEMEN'S CHAOS, MIGRANTS STREAM IN ONLY TO FACE TORMENT

ADEN: After reaching Yemen's shores in a packed migrant boat, the young Ethiopian coffee farmer was plunged into a living hell. The smugglers wanted thousands of dollars in ransom from the migrants, and they used him as an example of what would happen if they didn't pay. Each day for a month, they inflicted new tortures on him, Omar Farrag said. They put him in a tank of water and lit a fire underneath it. They wrapped his limbs with tight barbed wire. At times, they heated the barbed wire.

Finally, his younger brother came from Ethiopia with \$2,000 in ransom money. The smugglers decided they could squeeze more money out of him too, so they tortured his brother and ended up killing him, Farrag said. Now in the southern Yemeni city of Aden, the 26-year-old is overcome with guilt over his brother's death. "I got my brother killed; I am a disgrace. But it's impossible to imagine what I went through," Farrag said. "I don't even know where they buried him."

Migrants from the Horn of Africa are flowing into Yemen as ever growing rates despite the nearly 2-year-old civil war that has thrown the country into its own humanitarian crisis of hunger and displacement. The migrants - many, like Farrag, fleeing drought or poverty back home - are hoping to cross Yemen and reach neighboring oil-rich Saudi Arabia. More than 111,500 migrants landed on Yemen's shores last year, up from around 100,000 the year before, according to the Regional Mixed Migration Secretariat, a grouping of international agencies that monitors migration in the area.

Abuse and cruelty

The chaos caused by the civil war has raised migrants' hopes that they can slip through to Saudi Arabia, with no central authority keeping



ADEN: An employee speaks to Ethiopian migrants at International Organization for Migration center in the port city of Aden, Yemen. Despite Yemen's civil war, migrants are streaming in, hoping to make their way to wealthy Saudi Arabia. Instead, they often meet torture, rape and imprisonment at the hands of smugglers. — AP

watch. However, the turmoil has also left migrants vulnerable to abuse and cruelty at the hands of the armed trafficking rings, many believed connected to and acting with protection from the multiple militias involved in the war. After taking migrants' money as payment to transport them, the traffickers often demand more, sometimes even phoning their families in Ethiopia so they can hear the torment their loved ones are subjected to.

Rape is so widespread that women carry contraception for fear of becoming pregnant. "Migrants don't know they will have to pay twice: Once when they take the boat to cross the sea

and a second time upon arrival," said Laurent De Boeck, head of Yemeni operations of the International Organization for Migration, or IOM. "So when they don't pay, this is when the phase of abuses begins. They face torture, burns and rape."

Fate of migrants

The fate of migrants in Yemen remains a black hole. It is not known how many become trapped and abused, but officials from the IOM and other UN agencies believe it is widespread. It is not even known how many eventually make it to Saudi Arabia, as the kingdom does not release figures. Authorities in southern Yemen

have carried out forced deportations of migrants at least seven times, IOM officials said. In December, at least 25 drowned when they were forced onto boats to leave Aden.

The migrants were rounded up, packed onto small boats - as many as 150 to a vessel - and forced out to sea, according to Yemeni security officials in Aden. "They were led like animals with nothing with them but water," said one senior officer, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to talk to the press. Over 90 percent of the migrants belong to the Oromo community, Ethiopia's largest ethnic group, whose members often complain of discrimination at the hands of the Ethiopian government. Most are aged 25 and younger - some as young as 11, said Esam Al-Makhzomi an IOM official in Aden. According to IOM figures, around 20 percent of the migrants are unaccompanied minors. "There was an impression that the numbers are going down but in fact ... the numbers are huge and they continue to grow," he said.

Torture is rampant

He described trafficking as "an organized criminal ring. ... Nothing is random here." He said torture is rampant, aiming at scaring migrants and forcing them to pay more money. He said some local security and government officials provide cover for the traffickers. "There is torture, rape, and we have seen severe cases of abuse where the migrants lose their lives," al-Makhzomi said. Nearly 30 percent of the migrants who have sought IOM help to return home said they had been approached by one of the warring parties in Yemen - or by militant groups like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State group - trying to recruit them as fighters, de Boeck said. An estimated 9,000 migrants are being held in prisons, whether by the rebels or by opposing factions. — AP