

Trump Administration Plans to Close Key Immigration Operations Abroad

By Miriam Jordan

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The Trump administration is preparing to shutter many of its immigration operations abroad, cutting back on a key support system for those applying overseas to relocate to the United States.

The director of United States Citizenship and Immigration Services, L. Francis Cissna, told senior staff members this week that the international division, which has operations in more than 20 countries, would close down by the end of the year, according to two people with knowledge of the meeting.

Agency officials said the move was intended to provide more staff resources to handle the lengthy backlog in asylum applications from tens of thousands of migrants crossing the southern border every month. But it could come at the expense of legal migration, which President Trump has said he favors: Some agency staff members said closing overseas offices will make it more difficult and time-consuming to apply to immigrate from abroad, especially for refugees already in the United States who hope to bring other family members to join them.

“This is another instance of the Trump administration halting legal immigration by denying people the opportunity to file for immigration benefits in the most expedient manner,” said Margaret Stock, a retired United States Army lieutenant colonel and an immigration attorney who frequently handles such cases.

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The overseas division provides logistical assistance to American citizens, lawful permanent residents and refugees seeking to bring family members to the United States; people who have been persecuted and wish to resettle in the United States; Americans who adopt children internationally; and members of the military and their families applying for citizenship. It also plays a crucial role in immigration fraud detection.

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“It will be a great blow to the quality and integrity of the legal immigration system,” said Barbara Strack, who retired last year as the chief of the Refugee Affairs Division at the agency. “It will throw that system into chaos around the world.”

The International Operations Division has about 240 employees working at 24 field offices in 21 countries.

Jessica Collins, a spokeswoman for the agency, said the proposed reorganization would shift the agency’s workload to other offices but not necessarily cut back on its operations. “As we have internally shared, U.S.C.I.S. is in preliminary discussions to consider reallocation of its international U.S.C.I.S. office workloads to U.S.C.I.S. domestic offices in the United States and, where practicable, to U.S. embassies and consulates abroad,” she said in response to emailed questions.

“The goal of any such shift would be to maximize U.S.C.I.S. resources that could then be reallocated, in part, to backlog reduction efforts,” said Ms. Collins, who declined to elaborate further.

In recent months, the agency — which is primarily funded by fees paid by applicants, not by American taxpayers — has been reassigning adjudicators who handle green card and naturalization applications to process a bulging backlog of asylum claims filed by migrant families arriving at the southern border in record numbers.

“It is definitely not a preliminary discussion. It’s happening,” said a senior lawyer with the agency, noting that an international-operations training course scheduled in two weeks was canceled and that officers were told to return to their former jobs.

The staff member, who was not authorized to speak with the news media and spoke on the condition of anonymity, said that the work would either be done by temporary rotational staff “if absolutely needed, or pushed to the State Department, if the State Department is willing.”

A spokeswoman for the State Department referred all questions to Citizenship and Immigration Services.

In cities like Amman, Bangkok and Nairobi, staff with the agency’s International Operations Division conduct interviews with refugees whose relatives are already living in the United States and who wish to sponsor them for immigration, a process already plagued with delays because of additional layers of screening added under Mr. Trump’s travel ban targeting certain nations.

International staff also provide logistical support to teams of refugee officers who travel abroad on so-called circuit rides to interview refugees who have applied to be resettled in the United States, many of whom have remained in refugee camps for years.

“These refugee family members in East Africa have already faced tremendous delays in their cases, and this change will only make it worse,” said an agency staff member, who was not authorized to speak with the news media. “This is a disaster for them.”

The primary obligation of the international operations office in Bangkok, for example, is to handle refugee applications. “The demise of this office will mean that refugees will be cast adrift, literally,” said Diane Butler, an immigration lawyer in Seattle who visited that district office, which oversees all of Asia, in late February. She said that a new district director had been transitioning into the new position. “There was no hint of this,” she said.

The changes at U.S.C.I.S. come as the president’s proposed budget for the next fiscal year proposes cutting State Department funding for humanitarian assistance overseas, prompting concern from refugee advocates.

Mr. Trump’s spending plan, which is likely to face deep resistance on Capitol Hill, would reduce the State Department budget for humanitarian spending from about \$9.1 billion to about \$6 billion, according to budget documents released this week by the administration.

In addition, the budget proposal would virtually eliminate funding for the State Department’s Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, which for years has worked to help refugees resettle in the United States. The budget would transfer most of the money to a new program jointly administered by the United States Agency for International Development and the secretary of State.

“At a time where there have never been more forcibly displaced people in recorded history, this administration came to Capitol Hill and with a straight face said they were proposing a cut in humanitarian assistance of more than one-third,” said Eric Schwartz, the president of Refugees International, an advocacy organization.

“It’s all about the fact that the president has communicated that he doesn’t like refugees coming to the United States,” Mr. Schwartz said. “His administration is carrying out that obstruction in a determined way.”

Mr. Trump said in his State of the Union address last month that the United States needed legal immigrants. But his focus remains on fortifying the border, and the latest move is one of a series of policy moves that will have the effect of curbing legal immigration. His administration has slashed the number of refugees that can be admitted, narrowed who is eligible for asylum and made it more difficult to qualify for permanent residency or citizenship.

Under Mr. Cissna, who has crafted a number of measures to tighten immigration rules, the citizenship agency has taken on an unprecedented enforcement role. Last year, it established a “denaturalization task force” to strip citizenship from those found to have obtained it by fraudulent means. It has also drafted regulations to no longer allow spouses of those in the country on guest worker visas to obtain work permits.

The elimination of the international division would have the most potential impact on family reunification, the cornerstone of the country's immigration system for five decades, which Mr. Trump derisively refers to as "chain migration."

Transferring the workload to already overburdened staff at the State Department and the citizenship agency's domestic offices could lead to long delays, several agency officials and immigration lawyers said, keeping many applicants stranded abroad for months or longer as they and their loved ones navigate the necessary red tape needed to immigrate.

To the extent that work can be completed domestically or electronically, it has already been transferred, the current and former officials said.

"Its core mission is family reunification," said Justin Cox, senior supervising attorney at the International Refugee Assistance Project in New York. "In the best of circumstances, it is going to cause significant delays across the board. In the worst of circumstances, it could keep families apart for years."

United States military personnel abroad would no longer be able to file immigrant visa petitions for spouses and family members locally.

"It's going to smack all government employees abroad, including folks in the military, who have a foreign spouse or kids they are trying to bring to the U.S. legally," said Ms. Stock, who handles a number of such cases in her immigration practice.

She said that one of her clients, an American defense contractor living on a military base in Kuwait who married a Yemeni woman, could be forced to remain apart from his wife for an extended period of time after returning to the United States if he cannot apply for her green card abroad.

"If he can't get it through international operations, he will be thrown into the general U.S. backlog and have to be separated from his wife for more than a year," Ms. Stock said.

The average processing time for all cases at Citizenship and Immigration Services surged by 46 percent over the past two fiscal years and 91 percent since 2014, according to the American Immigration Lawyers Association.

Michael D. Shear contributed reporting.

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