

Japan, wary of outsiders, keeps doors closed to refugees

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Tokyo: For Mohammed, the perils of staying in Damascus crystalized when a sniper's bullet whizzed past his head while he and his cousins were on his rooftop, watching the Syrian air force bomb rebel forces.

The same roof where Mohammed and his lifelong friend Jamal used to sit in a tent and play video games. Now, instead of studying for a law degree, Mohammed is working as a fitness instructor in Tokyo, trying to squeeze in some language study and hoping that like Jamal, he'll beat the odds and win official status as a refugee in Japan.

The odds aren't good.

Out of the 7,533 people who applied for refugee status in 2014, or appealed earlier refusals, only 11 were approved. That includes Jamal, his mother and sister, whose approvals came after a year-and-a-half wait.

For most, the approval never comes: In the past five years, the proportion of applicants granted refugee status in Japan has dropped to below 1 percent — in 2014 it was just 0.2 percent.

In contrast, Germany has accepted nearly 40,000 Syrian asylum-seekers since 2013, while the U.S. has pledged to accept 10,000 Syrian refugees and has resettled 2,234 since 2010.

Japan's hands-off response to the global refugee crisis, despite its generous humanitarian aid, reflects deep unease over allowing in outsiders given the insular customs of this island nation. Despite growing concerns over a shrinking labor force, the government has so far resisted calls to open the door wider, both for humanitarian and economic reasons.

Immigration officials say they suspect many applicants of being job seekers, not true refugees fleeing persecution or conflict.

But for Mohammed, the reason was "just surviving," he said.

"I was on my roof, in my favorite spot," the 24-year-old said. "Then I heard, like, fuhfft, next to my ear. A sniper just missed me. So we laid down on the floor, me and my brother and two of our neighbors and we started laughing, but this kind of laughing is like, ah, OK, we're alive."

Mohammed is among 50 Syrians in Japan who have applied for asylum. Ten left the country voluntarily. Asylum-seekers are allowed to work while their applications are being processed.

In the past, Japan in some instances has allowed in refugees. During World War II, Chiune Sugihara, a Japanese diplomat stationed in Lithuania, granted transit visas to thousands of Jews, defying requirements that they have proper funds and a clear final destination after Japan.

Another official, Tatsuo Osako of the Japan Tourism Bureau's office in the port of Tsuruga, helped many Jews and Europeans who arrived to stay on. And in the 1980s, Japan resettled more than 10,000 Indochinese refugees, mostly Vietnamese boat people.

But for the most part, Japan has shut its doors. Of the 22,559 people of all nationalities who have sought political

asylum in Japan since 1982, immigration figures show, only 633 were granted refugee status.

Immigration officers do not provide reasons for their decisions, but Nobuhiro Tsuru, assistant director of refugee recognition at the Immigration Bureau, admits approvals are slowed by the volume of applications that must be handled by only 130 screening officers.

"As a result, those people who most need quick protection are affected. That's a fundamental problem," Tsuru said. "We haven't caught up with all kinds of recent developments, but we are trying to figure out how we can help those who really need help."

Limited public support for allowing in more displaced people weakened after the November attacks in Paris, "but we do take the criticisms seriously," he said.

To alleviate labor shortages in the construction sector and other industries, the government has expanded a program that brings in foreign technical trainees. The understanding is that those trainees will go home; in reality, many escape the menial, low-paying jobs they are sent to fill, in some cases seeking refugee status. The program is now being reviewed after being criticized as a cover for slave-like labor.

As of the end of 2014, there were 59.5 million individuals forcibly displaced worldwide as a result of persecution, conflict, violence or human rights violations, and is on track to exceed 60 million this year for the first time.

During a recent visit, U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees Antonio Guterres appealed to the government to increase the number of people allowed to resettle in Japan, "and especially now to look into the humanitarian admissions of Syrians."

Guterres also urged Japan to improve its asylum system, which many working with refugees say is flawed, and to do a better job of integrating those it accepts into their new communities.

Japan's Refugee Recognition Act does not include war refugees in its narrow interpretation of the international Refugee Convention. That excludes most of the millions fleeing the 5-year-old conflict in Syria, said Eri Ishikawa, who chairs the board of the Japan Association for Refugees, a group that helps asylum seekers with legal issues, food, housing and other needs.

"The government understands that everybody in a war zone would be in danger," said Ishikawa. "The Japanese interpretation of the refugee convention is unique and needs to be changed."

Shogo Watanabe, a lawyer who has been helping refugees seek asylum for years, says the biggest problem is that Japan's immigration policy geared toward keeping people out.

"The immigration bureau's main focus is to prevent undesirable foreigners from entering the country," he said. "So accepting refugees is contrary to their main mission. They have little motivation to accept outsiders."

Most of those refused asylum are not sent back straight away; dozens each year — 110 in 2014 — are granted special protection on humanitarian grounds. But heavy reliance on such arbitrary policies leaves many newcomers in a state of limbo, preventing them from getting language instruction, health insurance and other help they need to cope in their new home.

Maung Aung Thura Myint, a dapper, intense man who fled Myanmar as a 20-year-old political dissident, has lived with that uncertainty for half his 41 years, appealing repeated rejections of his requests for asylum, never knowing if or when

he might be detained, yet again, or deported.

"Japan says it is supporting countries overseas. But it already has people in its own country seeking help," Maung said.

Â "People who are seeking help need to be treated properly regardless of their religion or color."

Like many other exiles from Myanmar, Maung says he hopes to return home if the Southeast Asian country's shift in 2011 to a civilian, democratic government proves to be stable. But he fears leaving Japan without gaining a legal status guaranteeing he can return.

Distant Japan is an option for only a few of the more than 4 million Syrians who have fled their country, often ending up in overcrowded refugee camps, risking perilous voyages across the Mediterranean and treks through the mountains to enter Europe.

Mohammed and Jamal, who asked that their last names not be used out of concern for family members still in Turkey and Syria, managed to get tourist visas with the help of one of Jamal's relatives who lived in Japan for years.

A change in the policy toward Syrian refugees would require better planning on how to provide housing, education and jobs, says Tsuru, of the Immigration Department.

But he said, "I think Japan should consider taking a share in accepting the refugees."

- AP