

Chaos, despair reign as Trump's travel ban hits refugees, Muslims

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Washington: Despair and confusion set in Saturday among citizens of seven predominantly Muslim countries who found themselves abruptly unable to enter the United States a day after President Donald Trump signed an executive order that he billed as a necessary step to stop "radical Islamic terrorists" from coming to the U.S.

Protesters assemble at John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York

The 90-day travel ban is imposed on citizens of Iraq, Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia and Yemen and is extended to even those with who hold green card or permanent residence.

Trump's™ executive order also suspended the U.S. refugee program for 120 days.

The immediate fallout from Trump's order meant that an untold number of foreign-born US residents now traveling outside the countru could be stuck overseas for at least 90 days â€" despite holding permanent residency "green cards" or other visas.

And some foreign nationals who were allowed to board flights before the order was signed Friday were being detained at U.S. airports, told they were no longer welcome.

Those detained at airports included tourists, foreign students and people trying to visit friends and family.

Trump billed his sweeping executive order as a necessary step to stop "radical Islamic terrorists" from coming to the U.S. Included is a 90-day ban on travel to the U.S. by citizens of Iraq, Syria, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Somalia or Yemen and a 120-day suspension of the U.S. refugee program.

Trump's order singled out Syrians for the most aggressive ban, indefinitely blocking entry for anyone from that country, including those fleeing civil war.

The directive did not do anything to prevent attacks from homegrown extremists who were already in America, a primary concern of federal law enforcement officials. It also omitted Saudi Arabia, home to most of the Sept. 11 hijackers.

Refugee-rights groups and others immediately challenged the orders in court, and said the bans scapegoated Muslims and Arabs without making the United States safer.

Protests broke out at several U.S. airports where travelers were being detained, including a gathering of several hundred people outside San Francisco's main airport and a raucous demonstration of at least 2,000 people at New York's Kennedy International Airport.

A big crowd of demonstrators also gathered outside a U.S. courthouse in Brooklyn where lawyers for the American Civil Liberties Union were trying to get a judge to issue an order blocking detentions.

Trump's order came down as Hameed Khalid Darweesh, a translator and assistant for the U.S. military in Iraq for 10 years now fleeing death threats, was just minutes away from landing at Kennedy. He was among at least a dozen people detained after their arrivals Friday and Saturday.

After lawyers for refugee-rights organizations filed emergency petitions in federal court for their release, Darweesh walked free, to the applause of sign-waving demonstrators.

As a candidate Trump pledged to temporarily ban Muslims from coming to the U.S., then said he would implement "extreme vetting" for people from countries with significant terror concerns.

Trump told reporters Saturday the order is "not a Muslim ban."

"It's working out very nicely," Trump said of the implementation of his order. "We're going to have a very, very strict ban and we're going to have extreme vetting, which we should have had in this country for many years."

U.S. lawmakers and officials around the globe also criticized the move. Sen. Ben Sasse, a Nebraska Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, said while Trump is right to focus on border security, the order is "too broad."

"If we send a signal to the Middle East that the U.S. sees all Muslims as jihadis, the terrorist recruiters win by telling kids that America is banning Muslims and that this is America versus one religion," Sasse said. "Our generational fight against jihadism requires wisdom."

In Tehran, Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif said Iran would stop issuing new visas to U.S. citizens in response to Trump's ban, but that anyone already with a visa to Iran wouldn't be turned away.

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau took to Twitter Saturday afternoon to say that refugees were welcome in Canada, "regardless of your faith."

Two of the first people blocked from entering the United States were Iraqis with links to the U.S. military.

Hameed Khalid Darweesh and Haider Sameer Abdulkhaleq Alshawi were detained by immigration officials after landing at New York's Kennedy airport Friday night. Both had been released by Saturday night after their lawyers intervened.

Darweesh had worked as an interpreter for the U.S. Army when it invaded Iraq in 2003 and later worked as a contract engineer. In their court filing, his lawyers said Alshawi's wife had worked for a U.S. security contractor in Iraq. Members of her family had been killed by insurgents because of their association with the U.S. military.

The government can exempt foreign nationals from the ban if their entry is deemed in the national interest. But it was not immediately clear how that exemption might be applied.

Diplomats from the seven countries singled out by Trump's order would still be allowed into the U.S.

Those already in the U.S. with a visa or green card would be allowed to stay, according to the official, who wasn't authorized to publicly discuss the details of how Trump's order was being put in place and spoke only on condition of anonymity.

Trump's order also directed U.S. officials to review information as needed to fully vet foreigners asking to come to the U.S. and draft a list of countries that don't provide that information. That left open the possibility that citizens of other countries could also face a travel ban.

The U.S. may still admit refugees on a case-by-case basis during the freeze, and the government would continue to process requests from people claiming religious persecution, "provided that the religion of the individual is a minority religion in the individual's country."

The order sparked protests at several of the nation's international airports, including New York's Kennedy and Chicago's O'Hare and facilities in Minneapolis and Dallas-Forth Worth. In San Francisco, hundreds blocked the street outside the arrival area of the international terminal. Several dozen demonstrated at the airport in Portland, Oregon, briefly disrupting light rail service while hoisting signs that read "Portland Coffee Is From Yemen" and chanting anti-Trump slogans. Among the dozens showing support for refugees at Denver's airport were those who sang "refugees are welcome here."

The Council on American-Islamic Relations said it would challenge the constitutionality of Trump's order.

"There is no evidence that refugees â€” the most thoroughly vetted of all people entering our nation â€” are a threat to national security," said Lena F. Masri, the group's national litigation director. "This is an order that is based on bigotry, not reality."

John Cohen, a former Department of Homeland Security counterterrorism official who worked under Democratic and Republican administrations, said the order didn't address America's "primary terrorism-related threat" â€” people already in the U.S. who become inspired by what they see on the internet.

Trump's order drew support from some Republican lawmakers who have urged more security measures for the refugee vetting program, particularly for those from Syria.

"We are a compassionate nation and a country of immigrants. But as we know, terrorists are dead set on using our immigration and refugee programs as a Trojan Horse to attack us," House Homeland Security Committee Chairman Michael McCaul said in a statement Friday. "With the stroke of a pen, he is doing more to shut down terrorist pathways into this country than the last administration did in eight years."

It is unclear how many people would be immediately impacted by the non-refugee travel ban. According to the statistics maintained by the Homeland Security Department, about 17,000 students from the seven designated countries were

allowed into the U.S. for the 2015-2016 school year. In 2015 more than 86,000 people from those countries arrived in the U.S. on other, non-immigrant visas and more than 52,000 others became legal permanent residents.

Last year the U.S. resettled 85,000 people displaced by war, political oppression, hunger and religious prejudice, including more than 12,000 Syrians. Before leaving office President Barack Obama announced that the U.S. would accept 110,000 refugees in the coming year, but Trump's order cut that by more than half to 50,000.

No refugees were in the air when the travel ban was signed Friday, but about 350 people were in transit in Nairobi, Kenya, and were now stuck there, said Melanie Nezer, vice president of policy and advocacy for HIAS, a refugee resettlement aid agency. She said several hundred more people who were booked on U.S.-bound flights in the next week were now stranded around the globe.

"This in effect could be a permanent ban," she said. "Many of these people may never be able to come."

- (With AP inputs)