

# The San Diego Union-Tribune

San Diego, Thursday, October 8, 2015



By [Tatiana Sanchez](#) | 9:45 p.m. Oct. 7, 2015

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## County tops in refugee resettlement



Refugees from the Congo, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Syria, Afghanistan, Burundi, Burma, and Columbia, at the Alliance For African Assistance in San Diego. *Hayne Palmour IV*  
— *San Diego Union-Tribune*

San Diego County has taken in more refugees than any other region of California for the past seven years, according to state data.

It's the latest evidence of a decades-long trend in which the county has admitted a few thousand refugees each year, fueled by successions of strife around the world — from the fall of Saigon, Vietnam, to the Iraq War. That has made the area a hub of such resettlement in the United States.

The current phase of large-scale displacement has largely occurred in the Middle East, as war-weary Syrians and persecuted Iraqi Christians flee their countries. The unrest has led to an exodus of hundreds of thousands of people seeking refuge in nearby nations and increasingly in Europe.

Germany and other members of the European Union are struggling over how many of these individuals to accept. In past years, Germany has taken in about one refugee for every 1,000 residents, according to data cited by various German news outlets. That's roughly the same figure as in San Diego County.

This region gets approximately 3,000 new refugees each year, with a striking majority hailing from restive Iraq.

So far this year, the county has led the state in new refugees, said the California Department of Social Services' Refugee Programs Bureau. It also topped the state list last year, while Los Angeles County — about three times larger in population — came in a distant second.

Scholars and refugee advocates said San Diego's particularly pleasant weather, cultural diversity and extensive support network for refugees have made it a favored place for resettlement.

Federally contracted resettlement agencies and other organizations have formed a strong infrastructure of services available to refugees from the moment they step foot in San Diego, helping them navigate complex processes such as finding jobs, establishing financial credit and obtaining proper health care.

“The community here accepted us. It made us feel confident,” said Nasra Zora, an Iraqi refugee. She and her husband, Khaled Madalo, fled their native Iraq in 2001 after receiving repeated threats from government authorities.

They’re part of an estimated 14,500 Iraqi refugees who have started new lives in the county since 2009, the most of any ethnic group by a significant margin, according to data from the county’s Health and Human Services Agency, which oversees local refugee resettlement programs.

Zora and Madalo first went from Iraq to Lebanon, where they spent seven years and had two sons. The United States granted refugee status to the family in late 2007, and the household resettled in El Cajon with relatives.

San Diego County’s profusion of ethnic cultures makes it ideal for resettlement because refugees are likely to find people with similar backgrounds and stories of survival, said Zara Marselian, CEO and president of La Maestra Community Health Centers in San Diego. Her network provides health and wellness resources to low-income residents, immigrants and refugees.

“People seek a sense of community, they seek a sense of belonging. Where they’re going to belong faster is San Diego because there are other refugees from their country that have experienced similar things,” Marselian said.

Refugees are essentially asylum-seekers whose claims of persecution or other types of harm have been validated or otherwise recognized. Individuals must petition the United Nations for refugee status. Afterward, they must wait for an interview — a process that typically takes years. If they’re cleared, applicants are connected with a country or countries willing to accept them.

Resettlement cases in the U.S. are handled by several national umbrella agencies that together determine the best placement for those admitted. If refugees have family members in a particular area of the country, for example, they’re likely to be sent there.

The U.S. State Department contracts resettlement in California to certain agencies.

In San Diego County, the International Rescue Committee, Catholic Charities, the Alliance for African Assistance and Jewish Family Service of San Diego are federally sanctioned to resettle refugees. They act as one-stop shops, assisting refugees with every aspect of their new life for several months after arrival.

The region first saw a large wave of refugees in the 1970s, when the fall of Saigon brought about 360,000 Indochinese — Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians and Hmong — to the U.S.

Kongseng Soukbandith came to San Diego as a refugee from Laos in 1975.

Soukbandith, who currently works at La Maestra as a pediatric medical assistant and does outreach in the refugee community, remembers having minimal resources available to her and her children upon their arrival. Today's refugees have a much stronger support system, she said.

"It's better now because everyone can take care of themselves" with the better infrastructure, said Soukbandith, 65.

Political unrest in Africa brought another wave of refugees to San Diego in the 1980s and early '90s, especially those from Sudan, Ethiopia and Eritrea.

Daniel Ukang, now 36, was only 7 when government forces overtook his village in Sudan, killing people in plain sight. He hid alone in a bush for three days until the violence passed, but he was separated from his parents in the process.

Ukang became one of the "Lost Boys" of Sudan, one of more than 20,000 children who were displaced or orphaned when villages in southern Sudan were attacked during the country's civil war.

"Being chased by the enemy ... it was just very rough," he said.

Ukang lived in a tent at a refugee camp in Kenya for 10 years, eating one meal per day. He was granted refugee status in San Diego in 2001. His wife, Mary, and their son were able to reunite with him seven years later. The couple now has four children.

"The first thing I thought when I came here was, 'This is amazing,'" he said. "The weather was the number one thing."

Ukang, who works at the Barona Resort & Casino, still carries the weight of his past.

“What everybody has gone through is unforgettable. ... Sometimes you have nightmares about what happened,” he said. “But seeing other (refugees) making good progress makes you stronger.”

Large groups of Middle Eastern refugees began settling in the U.S. after the Iraq War began in 2003. They continue to come, particularly with the heightened persecution of Syrians and Chaldeans.

What’s likely to significantly impact the nation’s refugee population in the years to follow is the stream of Syrian refugees expected to resettle in the United States. Under mounting pressure to respond to the Syrian crisis, President Barack Obama said the U.S. would take in at least 10,000 displaced Syrians in the current fiscal year, which began this month.

Local resettlement agencies said they don’t have details yet on whether they’ll admit Syrians, though they say it’s likely. They estimate that between 100 to 300 Syrians may be placed in this region.



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