



Refugee Resettlement: History & Laws Our Community Needs to Know

Our Story, Our Faith: Burma Christian Diaspora in Indianapolis
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This workshop provides general legal information – not legal advice

Session Roadmap

- ▶ Why this conversation matters
- ▶ Who is a refugee
- ▶ History of refugee protection
- ▶ Why churches mattered – and still matter
- ▶ How U.S. resettlement work
- ▶ Burma refugees in the U.S. and why Indiana matters
- ▶ Reflection & action

Opening Reflection

If you had to flee your home tonight with only one bag, where would you go? Who would help you survive?

1. Who Is a Refugee?

A person who...

“... owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country”

- *UN Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, 1951*

Key Distinctions

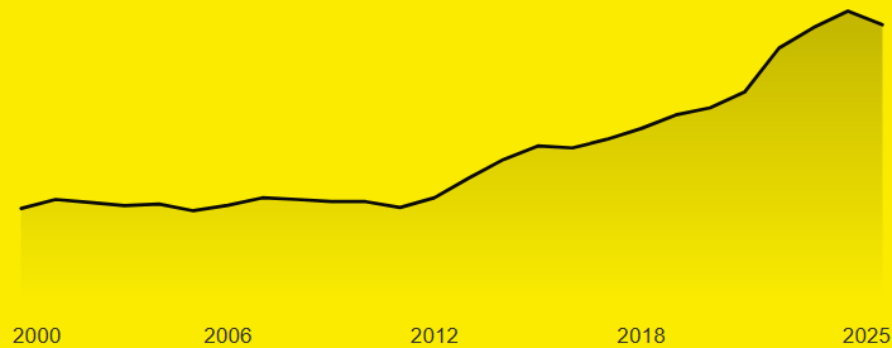
Term	Meaning
Refugee	Forced to flee to another country and later approved as refugee before entering the U.S.
Asylee	Applies for protection after arriving in the U.S.
Immigrant	Moves <i>permanently</i> through family/employment pathways
Migrant	Moves from to another country to find work or better living conditions
Internally Displaced Person	Fled home but stayed within own country

Global Numbers

117.3 MILLION

Forcibly displaced people worldwide

Forcibly displaced people worldwide at mid-2025 as a result of persecution, conflict, violence, human rights violations or events seriously disturbing public order.



73.5 MILLION

are internally displaced people (Source: IDMC, as of end-2024)



36.4 MILLION

are refugees



8.4 MILLION

are asylum-seekers



6.1 MILLION

are other people in need of international protection



- ▶ 49 million (40%) are children.
- ▶ 2.3 million children were born as refugees.
- ▶ 67% originate from just five countries: Syria Arab Republic, Venezuela, Ukraine, Afghanistan and Sudan
- ▶ Less than 1% of refugees are afforded the opportunity of resettlement

2. History of Refugee Law

International Level

- ▶ 1951 Refugee Convention,
- ▶ Created after WWII

Federal Level

- ▶ The Refugee Act of 1980
- ▶ A landmark U.S. federal law

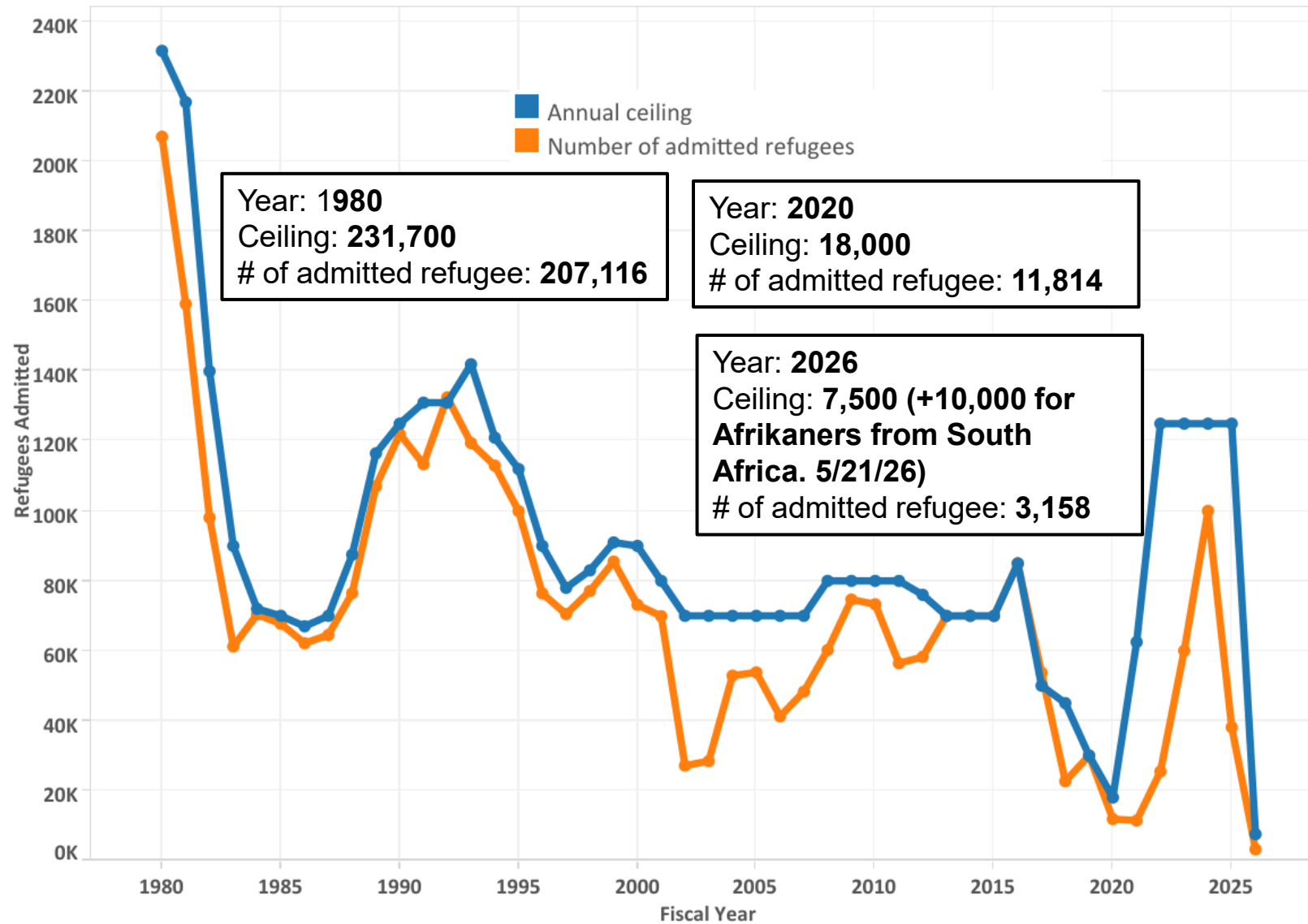
2. History.... The Refugee Act of 1980

- ▶ Standardized refugee admissions into U.S. law.
- ▶ Legal definitions aligned with international law
- ▶ Created a federal coordination system of refugee process
 - ▶ PRM: Bureau of Population, Refugees, & Migration (manages overseas phase of refugee resettlement).
 - ▶ ORR: Office of Refugee Resettlement (manages domestic phase – i.e. aid to states and local volunteer agencies)
- ▶ Created the asylum process
- ▶ Permanent resettlement procedures

2. History.... The Refugee Act of 1980

- ▶ Annual admission ceiling set by Presidential Determination (PD)
 - ▶ PD set each federal fiscal year (10/1-9/30)
 - ▶ President is required to consult with Congress on:
 - ▶ Global refugee crisis update
 - ▶ Justification for the PD number

U.S. Refugee Admissions & Refugee Resettlement Ceilings, FY 1980-2026 (Oct-Feb)*



Migration Policy Institute (MPI) Data Hub
<http://migrationpolicy.org/programs/data-hub>

3. Why Refugee Resettlement Exists & Role of Faith Communities

- ▶ Faith-based organizations (FBO) are the backbone of modern refugee resettlement.
- ▶ Prior to 1980, ad-hoc era, crisis-by-crisis without a formalized national policy
- ▶ The Sanctuary Movement (1980s): congregations formed to support undocumented immigrants and refugees fleeing violence in Central America like El Salvador and Guatemala.
 - ▶ U.S. classified them as “economic migrants” not political refugees. Thus, no path to refugee nor apply for asylum before 1980’s.
 - ▶ Church Action: Churches declared “sanctuaries” providing shelter, food and legal aid.

3. Religious Foundations

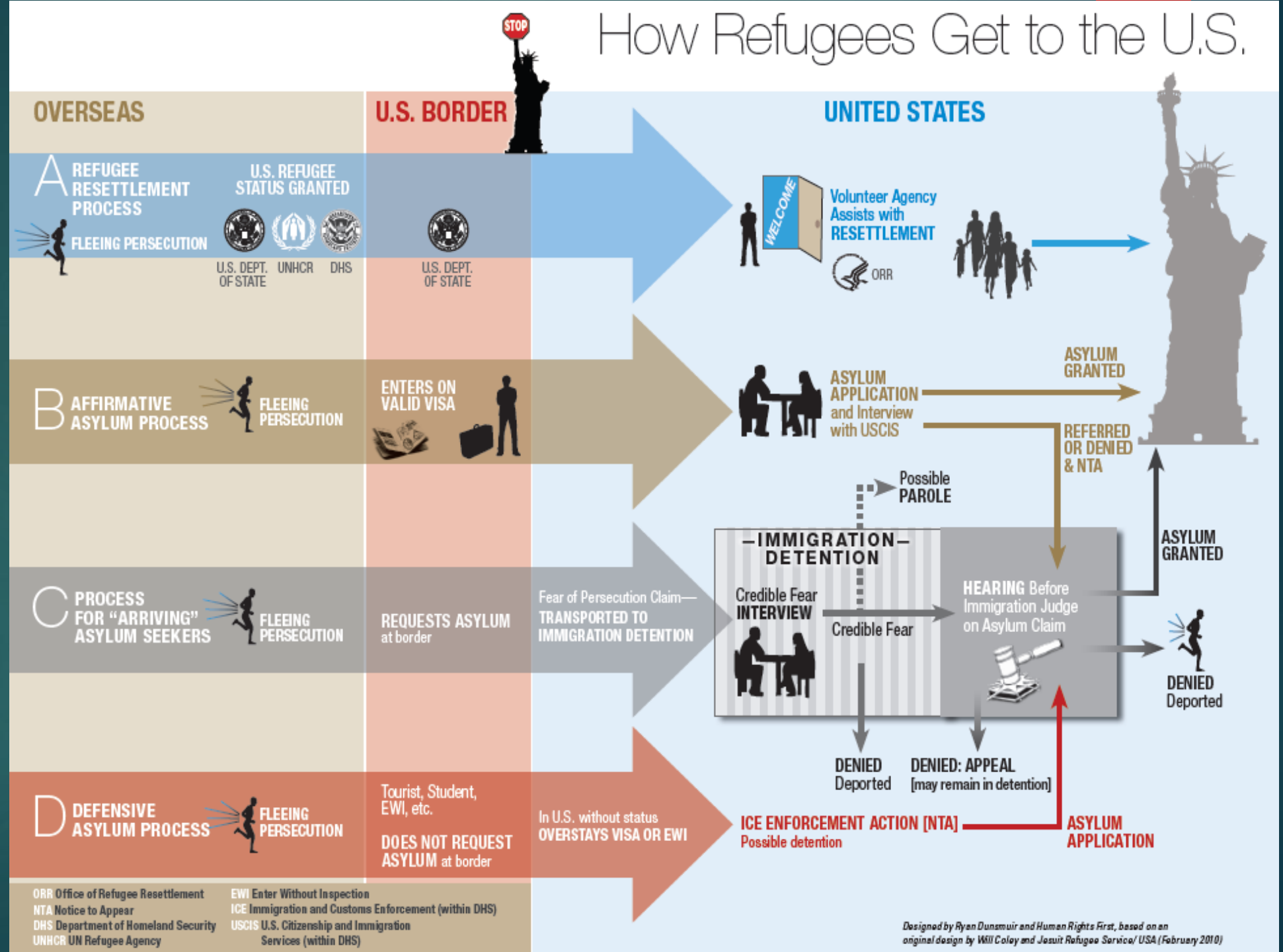
Faith tradition teachings: welcoming and protecting the strangers, widows, exiles, and the persecuted. Seeking true justice, human dignity, and defending them.

e.g: Zechariah 7:9–10; Deuteronomy 10:18–19; Psalm 146:9; Isaiah 1:17; Matthew 25:35-40

3 - Current Major Refugee Resettlement Orgs

- ▶ Faith-Based Agencies
 - ▶ Church World Services
 - ▶ World Relief
 - ▶ Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society
 - ▶ Catholic Charities USA
 - ▶ Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Services
- ▶ Non-Religious or Broad Humanitarian Organization
 - ▶ International Rescue Committee

4. Refugees Resettlement Process



4. Refugee Resettlement Process Cont.

- ▶ Dept of State's Reception and Placement Program assists funds for an initial 90-day period
- ▶ Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) via the DHHS provides additional assistance
- ▶ MUST apply for a "green card" one year after resettlement.
- ▶ MAY apply to naturalize five years after LPR if all conditions met.

5. Myanmar Refugees in the U.S. and Indiana

- ▶ Plenary I & II: Migration and God's Faithfulness, and Social History of Refugee Resettlement
- ▶ Plenary III: Burma Refugee Communities' Resettlement: Refugee Laws, Due to experiencing persecution
- ▶ Beginning mid 2000s, Burma refugees became one of the largest refugee population resettled in the U.S.

5. State Level Application - Indiana

- ▶ Exodus Refugee Immigration Inc (Inpls, Bloomington)
- ▶ Catholic Charities (Inpls, Fort Wayne (Fort Wayne-South Bend)
- ▶ Church World Services (CWS) (Indianapolis)
- ▶ God is Good Foundation (Evansville)
- ▶ United Religious Community of St. Joseph County, Inc. (South Bend)

Important Clarification

- ▶ Refugee status is not temporary tourist permission.
- ▶ It is a legal protection system designed for permanent safety and long-term integration.

6. What Legal Status Do Refugees Have?

A refugee enters the U.S. lawfully with protected legal status. They can:

- work
- obtain a Social Security number
- receive certain public benefits
- apply for permanent residence or “green card”
- Apply for naturalization after 5 years if qualify.

Final Food for Thought....

- ▶ What misconceptions about refugees are most common in your community?
- ▶ What role should faith communities play today?
- ▶ How can refugee communities preserve identity while integrating successfully?
- ▶ What barriers do Myanmar refugees still face in Indiana?
- ▶ What should younger generations understand about displacement and democracy?



Closing Reflection

Refugees: Resettled, No Choice Given; Not simply about convenient migration.