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Dingell questions fed aid of Iraq war refugees

Dearborn congressman says resources limited, while local agencies say number of arrivals low.

Gregg Krupa / The Detroit News

U.S. Rep. John Dingell is asking Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice what the federal government intends to do to assist the 4.5 million Iraqi refugees and people displaced internally within the country as a result of the war, which will be five years old next month.

"Our government does not appear to have a long-term strategy to address this crisis," Dingell, D-Dearborn, said in a letter he and U.S. Rep. Alcee Hastings, D-Florida, sent to Rice Tuesday.

"In addition to the moral and humanitarian elements of this problem, the lack of resources being provided to refugees and displaced persons from the United States and the international community is creating a potential security crisis, as the most vulnerable Iraqis are turning to extremist elements for assistance."

The flow of refugees never rose to the level the U.S. Department of State said would be accepted. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees says approval of refugees' applications for entry to the U.S. has slowed in recent months.

Some of the refugees have risked their lives to assist the American war effort, officials said.

Spokesmen for the state department said they had not yet received Dingell's letter, dated Tuesday. But department officials acknowledged in a media briefing Monday that while the department expected that 7,000 refugees would be accepted last year and an additional 12,000 this year, only 3,040 have arrived.

Meanwhile, the number declined from 450 in October to 245 in December.

Some of the refugees are destined for Michigan because of the large Iraqi population here.

Officials of local relief agencies, Lutheran Social Services and the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services, say that fewer than 500 Iraqi refugees have arrived in Michigan.

"It's an embarrassingly small number," said Nabby Yono, vice president of community relations for the Arab-American Chaldean Council in Lathrup Village.

Dingell said constituents have approached him about the issue.

"I first started taking action on this issue after some of the imams in my district brought to my attention a New York Times article describing how many women and girls were being forced into prostitution in Syria because of the desperate nature of the situation there," Dingell told The Detroit News.

"We were told to prepare for a lot more to come," said Hannan Deep, director of communications for ACCESS. "They never came."

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