

Politics casts shadow over celebration by R.I. refugees

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World Refugee Day festivities in Providence include music, dancing — and talk of immigration raids.

PROVIDENCE — The Refugee Dream Center planned for its World Refugee Day celebration Saturday to be a relaxed affair, said Omar Bah, the center's executive director.

Yet for him, it took on political overtones the moment President Donald Trump tweeted about nationwide immigration sweeps that were slated to start Sunday.

"I find that the politicization of the event is based on circumstances," said Bah, speaking before Trump tweeted Saturday about a two-week delay on the raids. "I find it difficult to host refugee events and speak on refugee issues without being critical of the Trump administration."

The conversation stood in stark contrast to the celebration of music, dancing, artistry and food going on at 1340 Lockwood St. — and emphasized another aspect of Bah's message to immigrants.

"This event is most importantly a welcome environment to let our refugee neighbors know that they are welcome," he said. "[But] we had to talk about the possibility of raids and tell people to be extra careful ..."

Nduwuwami François, 18, who was born in a Tanzanian refugee camp after his family fled civil war in Burundi, expressed disappointment at the current state of affairs.

“I believe it honestly shows what America really means,” he said. “It goes to show the kind of freedom we talk about isn’t really there in this country.

“You are talking about coming into the middle of people’s lives and saying, ‘Yo, you got to bounce.’ That is just crazy.”

“Things like World Refugee Day shows how powerful us refugees are,” said Kamar Gure, a Somali 18-year-old born in the Dadab Refugee Camp in Kenya. “We are not animals like Donald Trump says we are.”

Gure, a refugee when she was 16 and now a permanent resident, said girls as young as 8 were raped in Dadab and that moving to the U.S. allowed her the security and stability to obtain a 4.0 grade-point average in her studies.

“I achieved,” she said. “I want Americans to know that we are as capable as they are of contributing to society. Becoming a refugee was never our first choice.”

For Night Jean Muhingabo, who was born in the Republic of the Congo - Brazzaville after his family fled the Rwandan Genocide of 1994, said that though the current state of affairs in the U.S. strikes fear into an already traumatized population, there is still cause to celebrate.

“We are here to celebrate ourselves,” he said. “We are here to celebrate what we have achieved here. That’s why I read a poem earlier about making the world a better place, to inspire us through this time.

“My parents escaped Congo to escape this kind of dictatorship,” he added. “This is all kind of scary in our community and for me and my family.”

Nonetheless, for those who spoke to The Providence Journal, there were no regrets about coming to the U.S.

“There is still hope,” Gure said.

Around 3 p.m. — two hours after The Journal sat down with the refugees — Trump tweeted that he would order a two-week delay in the deportations.

“At the request of Democrats, I have delayed the Illegal Immigration Removal Process (Deportation) for two weeks to see if the Democrats and Republicans can get together and work out a solution to the Asylum and Loophole problems at the Southern Border,” he tweeted. “If not, Deportations start!”

U.S. Rep. David N. Cicilline, D-R.I., responded to the tweet, saying that it appeared to be part of the president’s approach toward immigration issues.

“It’s now clear that the President is using immigrant families as a bargaining chip to force taxpayers to build him an expensive, ineffective wall on the U.S.-Mexico border,” Cicilline, who spoke at the celebration earlier, said in an afternoon news release. “Immigration reform is a serious issue. The President’s approach for dealing with it has been anything but.”

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