

Idaho refugee center finds community support, opposition

By KIMBERLEE KRUESI, Associated Press

TWIN FALLS, Idaho (AP) — Asmir Kararic's first night in a tiny Idaho town included a rare luxury: He didn't have to sleep with his shoes on as he did when he was a teenager during the war in his native Bosnia-Herzegovina, prepared to flee at a moment's notice.

Kararic is not so sure refugees like him would get the same reception today in Twin Falls, a politically and religiously conservative town nestled by the Snake River Canyon and surrounded by large dairy and agricultural producers about 130 miles from Boise.

"It's harder now, especially if they're coming from countries with terrorism," the 10-year veteran town police officer said.

The town has been home for more than three decades to the region's lone refugee resettlement program, which is now facing opposition amid the national debate over the vetting of refugees fleeing war-torn Syria and more recently following the deadly attacks in San Bernardino, California, and Paris.

Critics began demanding earlier this year that the refugee center, managed by the College of Southern Idaho but run with federal funding, be shut down after news broke that the program would receive more refugees starting in October. They feared the refugees would be radicalized Muslims, terrorists in disguise.

The U.S. State Department has said the refugees coming to the United States would be spread across the country and go through multiple layers of vetting.

"I've met refugees before, and I am not impressed. They are not our problem," Twin Falls resident Joel Climer said. "We have our own problems we need to take care of."

Climer is one of the purported 1,500 people who have signed a petition that would shutter the refugee center or force the community college to sever its tie

with the program through a ballot initiative. The initiative would ban refugee centers in Twin Falls County. However, it's still unknown if such a measure is legal or enforceable.

The initiative needs roughly 4,000 signatures to make it onto the election ballot next spring. The county clerk has verified only a handful of the signatures so far, but petition leader Rick Martin said he's confident he'll meet the threshold.

He said the refugee program is a drain on local resources and argues that the government has no way to properly vet refugees. As a Christian, Martin said he believes individuals should help people in need but believes the program is a racket, not compassionate.

"Opposition is growing more and more as people are waking up to the dangers of Islam," Martin said.

Liyah Babayan, owner of a women's consignment boutique and former refugee from Azerbaijan, said the recent arguments against accepting refugees are just a mask for a minority group to peddle racism and fear. "They try to blanket it with being anti-terrorism, so it can be a noble cause," said Babayan, who is now a United States citizen.

Idaho has been resettling refugees since the 1970s. The effort originally focused on people fleeing Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos following the end of the Vietnam War and then expanded to those escaping Soviet regimes in eastern Europe.

As the amount of refugees needing help increased, so did Idaho's resettlement programs and the Twin Falls center was founded five years later.

Today, the low cost of living, easy ability to secure a job and community support continue to be the top reasons why Twin Falls is an ideal resettlement location for refugees, said Zeze Rwasama, director of the CSI Refugee Center.

"We are bringing in these people to save their lives," said Rwasama, also a former refugee from the Democratic Republic of Congo. "If you wanted to be a terrorist, going through the refugee program is not it."

Rwasama said he believes the peak of the opposition in Twin Falls is waning after spending months giving information presentations to churches and civic groups on what the refugee program does and doesn't do.

He takes comfort seeing new donations and having to hire a volunteer coordinator as more people have sought to help around the center.

This isn't the first time concerns over Islam has surfaced this year in Idaho.

In February, a former Muslim turned Christian pastor met with a dozen lawmakers in the Idaho Capitol to call for limiting Islamic immigration and blocking refugees from settling in the state after alleging they intend to change Idaho's society.

Around that same time, a Republican organization in the northern part of the state considered — but voted down — a measure that would have tried to designate Idaho as a Christian state.

Currently, police are investigating a possible hate crime after the Islamic Center of Twin Falls was vandalized with the words "Hunt Camp?" Police say the words referred to a former Japanese internment camp a few miles north of Twin Falls.

Islamic Center Spokesman Imad Eujayl said the center still feels supported by the community, but after stressing that the center and refugee program were two separate organizations, he declined to comment further.

Copyright 2015 The Associated Press