

SOUTH KOREA: Korea gives 2 Yemeni asylum seekers refugee status

468 Yemenis denied refugee status

By Lee Suh-yoon

The Korea Times (14.12.2018) – <https://bit.ly/2BsCC6T> – Just two Yemeni asylum seekers – a tiny percentage of the 484 on Jeju Island seeking asylum this year – were granted refugee status in a final announcement by the immigration authorities Friday. The rest were rejected but mostly granted a one-year humanitarian stay visas.

The two successful applicants were journalists who were subject to political persecution in Yemen, the Ministry of Justice said

“Both journalists received death threats for criticizing the Houthi insurgency,” the Jeju branch of the ministry’s immigration office said in a press statement.

The announcement came after months of heated controversy over the Yemeni refugees who arrived on Jeju Island earlier this year. Their arrival incited protests fueled by Islamophobia and worries about “fake refugees” taking jobs and using up resources.

As well as the granting of refugee status to the journalists, the ministry gave 412 were given one-year humanitarian stay permits, while rejecting 56 on the basis of their criminal record and other factors.

Human rights institutions and refugees rights groups immediately protested the tiny acceptance rate, claiming the ministry's decision was biased.

"The ministry's decision is apparently aimed at appeasing some of the public's negative sentiment against Yemeni refugees, rather than a decision based on individual interviews with the asylum seekers," Choi Young-ae, head of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), said in a statement.

Korea, a signatory to the U.N. Refugee Convention, has a refugee acceptance rate of just 4 percent. Only around 580 asylum seekers have been granted such status since 1994.

"It seems like a very political decision, rejecting the vast majority to escape public criticism, but still sliding two refugees into the picture to appear less biased than they are," Kim Dae-kwon, head of local migrant rights group Friends of Asia, told the Korea Times.

"These Yemeni asylum seekers all escaped from the worst situations, so there is no reason why more should not be granted refugee status."

The renewable humanitarian stay visas allow the asylum seekers to leave Jeju for other parts of the country as long as they report their location to the authorities. More than 250 of 362 Yemeni refugees who were given the permits in October have moved to the mainland for better work opportunities.

Unlike refugee status, one-year humanitarian permits limit job options and block access to health care, education and welfare benefits. About 2,000 asylum seekers are staying in Korea through the permits, according to refugee rights group NANCEN.

As the situation in their home countries remains the same, if not worse, many end up living here without basic public benefits or working options for more than 20 years, renewing their one-year visas each year.

Even those granted refugee status often do not get the state support necessary to help them settle in Korea.

“We frequently get reports of accepted refugees becoming homeless,” said Koh Eun-ji, a NANCEN activist. “There is no reliable settlement process provided by the government that helps them learn the Korean language, Korean culture, or how to navigate life here.”

Ongoing conflicts in the Middle East are sending wave after wave of refugees into developed nations. This year, the number of refugee applications in Korea surpassed 10,000 for the

first time – an eight-fold increase from five years ago.

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