



“The resettlement agencies have been operating in crisis mode since the fall and they are doing a little bit better, but all are still dramatically understaffed and overworked. We’re trying to fill in the gaps.”

— Nan Warshaw, founder of Refugee Community Connection



Refugees from Afghanistan attend a prayer service with the community at the Mecca Center in Willowbrook on Feb. 11. ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

The young Afghan men prayed together at a Willowbrook mosque just two days after arriving in Illinois from a military base in New Jersey. Afterward, they shared a meal of chicken, rice and samosas.

In the midst of listening to words of welcome over lunch, one of the men raised his hand.

“I don’t have a question, but I thank you for everything,” he said, through a translator.

After a pause, he added: “I love your food.”

The men are among scores of Afghan refugees arriving in Illinois this month, as the U.S. government works to move people from military bases into communities. Since September, about 2,142 Afghans have resettled in Illinois, according to the Illinois Department of Human Services. In all, Illinois plans to welcome about 2,500 to 3,000 refugees.

Chicagoland resettlement agencies and related nonprofit groups have worked on overdrive with strained resources since the U.S. completed its troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in August, leaving the country in

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HOW TO HELP

Join Refugee Community Connection on Facebook.

Visit the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago for information on assisting in housing, donations, volunteering and other tasks.

Visit Exodus World Service for information on volunteering.

Go to the RefugeeOne website for information on donating or getting involved

Visit the Urban Muslim Minority Alliance page for information about donations or volunteers.

‘Overnight their lives were just uprooted’

Chicago area welcomes another wave of Afghan refugees. Illinois has resettled over 2,000 since September.

By Madeline Buckley | Chicago Tribune

Putin orders shift in forces

Timetable unclear in decree covering disputed provinces

By Vladimir Isachenkov, Yuras Karmanau and Lorne Cook
Associated Press

MOSCOW — A long-feared Russian invasion of Ukraine appeared to be imminent Monday, if not already underway, with Russian President Vladimir Putin ordering forces into separatist regions of eastern Ukraine.

A vaguely worded decree signed by Putin did not say if troops were on the move, and it cast the order as an effort to “maintain peace.” But it appeared to dash the slim remaining hopes of averting a major conflict in Europe that could cause massive casualties, energy shortages on the continent and economic chaos around the globe.

Putin’s directive came hours after he recognized the separatist areas in a rambling, fact-bending discourse on European history. The move paved the way to provide them military support, antagonizing Western leaders who regard such a move as a breach of world order, and set off a frenzied scramble by the U.S. and others to respond.

Underscoring the urgency, the U.N. Security Council set a rare nighttime emergency meeting on Monday at the request of Ukraine, the U.S. and other countries. Ukraine’s president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, sought to project calm, telling the country: “We are not afraid of anyone or anything. We don’t owe anyone anything. And we won’t give anything to anyone.”

The White House issued an executive order to

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Extra-alarm Albany Park blaze destroys brewery and gym

Records show building nearby had previous violations; 1 seriously injured

By Olivia Olander, Cecilia Reyes and Stacy St. Clair
Chicago Tribune

When an extra-alarm blaze in Albany Park left one person seriously injured and destroyed a popular brewery Monday, embattled landlord Gary Carlson said he knew fingers would point toward his apartment building.

And it wasn’t without some reason.

The city last year sued Carlson over exterior conditions at the North Richmond Street property, noting that inspectors could not get inside the two-story building,

public records show. Three months later, on a Cook County judge’s orders, city inspectors visited again and found fire safety violations inside the property, including a common stairway devoid of smoke detectors.

Throughout the building, inspectors also found defective light fixtures and no emergency lighting, which they labeled “dangerous and hazardous.” A judge ordered Carlson to put in working smoke detectors within 24 hours and fix the electrical issues by the next court date, scheduled for last Thursday, four days before the extra-alarm fire.



Firefighters work to put out a large fire on West Montrose Avenue at North Richmond Street in Albany Park on Monday. JOSE M. OSORIO/CHICAGO TRIBUNE

After initially suggesting the fire started in the apartment building, the Chicago Fire Department later clarified that the point of origin appeared to be between Carlson’s property and a neighboring business. The popular brewery Twisted Hippo was largely reduced to rubble after a series of explosions could be heard inside the building during

the blaze. An obstacle course gym called Ultimate Ninjas was also destroyed and dozens of people forced out of their homes.

A man, estimated to be about 60 years old, was taken to Swedish Hospital in serious condition for smoke inhalation, officials said. No other injuries

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Lightfoot slow to hire new inspector general

Ferguson left months of time for search

By Gregory Pratt
Chicago Tribune

More than half a year since Chicago’s inspector general announced he would be stepping down, Mayor Lori Lightfoot still hasn’t named a permanent replacement to fill the critical position.

Former Inspector General Joe Ferguson announced he would not seek reappointment in a July 2021 letter urging Lightfoot and aldermen to begin the replacement process. Ferguson said he was giving the city more than 100 days’ notice so that officials could perform a legally mandated national search and make the hire before his term expired in mid-October.

City officials were slow to start the process, however, and Lightfoot has yet to



Joe Ferguson announced in July he wouldn’t seek reappointment as inspector general. BRIAN CASSELLA/CHICAGO TRIBUNE 2018

hire a permanent inspector general, drawing concern from some good government advocates and city leaders.

The inspector general is

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Tom Skilling’s forecast High 45 Low 16

Chicago Weather Center: Forecast on Page 12

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Refugees

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control of the Taliban and tens of thousands of people evacuated to the U.S. due to the humanitarian crisis there. Many Afghan workers who aided the U.S. military during the war have sought asylum in other countries, fearing for their safety under a Taliban regime.

Though the agencies have welcomed a steady flow of refugees since August, they are geared up to accept an influx of new people this month, as federal officials designated Feb. 15 as a goal for emptying the military bases that had served as temporary housing, according to those working in the resettlement process and reporting from national outlets.

Resettlement agencies, still in the process of rebuilding after being whittled down during the Trump era, are working with nonprofit groups, mosques, churches, private donors and volunteers to bridge the gaps in funding and resources.

“Even though the government will support people for a short period of time, the funding offered is bare minimum,” said Irshad Khan, chairman of the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago. “We are asking our communities to step up.”

Because the resettlement agencies are operating at capacity, the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago is among the organizations aiding in the efforts.

“These are families who were assisting the U.S. military in Afghanistan. They had good jobs,” said Ayesha Ahmed, board director of development at Urban Muslim Minority Alliance, who has also been working closely with refugees. “Overnight, their lives were just uprooted.”

A high level of need

Those who work with refugees said their communities are offering money, time and translation services



Local men and refugees from Afghanistan pray as they attend a service with the Muslim community at the Mecca Center on Feb. 11.



Afghanistan refugees gather for lunch following prayers at the Mecca Center. ANTONIO PEREZ/CHICAGO TRIBUNE PHOTOS

and donating basic necessities. But the need is overwhelming, they say.

Generally, the government supports refugees for a short time period, after which, they rely on private funding through nonprofits and resettlement agencies until they are self-sufficient.

Since September, the Illinois Department of Human

Services has provided more than \$12.5 million in state and federal funding, along with some ongoing rolling funding, to the refugee process, including funds for emergency housing assistance, mental health, legal assistance and other aspects of the resettlement process.

Jims Porter, manager of communications and advo-

cacy at RefugeeOne, a resettlement agency in Chicago, said the agency settled more refugees in a three-month period than during the three previous fiscal years combined.

Porter said resettlement agencies lost infrastructure during the years former President Donald Trump was in office. The agencies are in the process of rebuilding.

“It’s definitely put a stress or strain on the system,” he said, adding that they rely heavily on community support.

Nan Warsaw, founder of a group that seeks to help resettlement agencies meet the basic needs of refugees, uses Facebook to crowdsource in obtaining much-needed items. Her group, Refugee Community Connection, provides winter apparel, pots and pans, toiletries and culturally relevant items like Afghan rugs. The organization also stocks up these items in free stores in Rogers Park and Albany Park.

“The resettlement agencies have been operating in crisis mode since the fall and they are doing a little

bit better, but all are still dramatically understaffed and overworked,” Warsaw said. “We’re trying to fill in the gaps.”

Housing is one of the most difficult hurdles in the resettlement process, experts say. There is already a lack of affordable housing in Chicago, and refugees generally come with no credit or rental history. RefugeeOne guarantees rent for the first three months, Porter said.

“There is a need right now for landlords, rental management agencies to open their doors to refugees to start a new life here,” he said.

‘It takes a long time to start over’

During a Friday prayer service days before Valentine’s Day, Imam Hassan Aly of the Mecca Center in Willowbrook spoke about love among community members. He bid his community to embrace the newly arrived refugees praying beside them.

“Today, we have a beau-

tiful group of our Afghan brothers who are visiting us, who just came to Illinois two days ago,” Aly said during the service. “We are so honored and so humbled to welcome them.”

Despite working with strained resources, those coordinating resettlement efforts say their communities have stepped up.

Volunteers with Exodus World Service, which works with resettlement agencies, have helped welcome more newly arrived refugees in recent months than all of last year, said Susan Odom, the executive director.

“It takes a long time to start over and rebuild your life,” Odom said. “We do need volunteers and more people to be involved.”

A group of north suburban Illinoisans are supporting about eight Afghan families who are living in a hotel, said Ahmed, of the Urban Muslim Minority Alliance. They cater Friday dinners for them, provide basic necessities as well as company and comfort.

One Friday at the hotel, Ahmed watched a mother video-chat with her daughter, who was still in Afghanistan. The teenager was separated from her family amid the chaos that upended Kabul as the U.S. withdrew, Ahmed said, and did not make it out of the country.

The volunteers are working with the family to bring their daughter here, including eliciting the help of local officials. A spokesperson for U.S. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Illinois, confirmed the office is working with the family to do what it can.

“It’s heartbreaking,” Ahmed said.

The family’s story is just one of many who risked their lives to come, and were forced to leave loved ones back home.

“None of the 9/11 hijackers were Afghani, but their country has been in some kind of war for the last 40 years,” Ahmed said. “All of a sudden they were just kind of displaced overnight.”

“I really feel like it is our duty as Americans to help them rebuild their lives.”

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A Ukrainian soldier takes a cigarette break on Monday in a trench in Novozvanivka, Ukraine. TYLER HICKS/THE NEW YORK TIMES

Russia

from Page 1

prohibit U.S. investment and trade in the separatist regions, and additional measures — likely sanctions — were to be announced Tuesday. Those sanctions are independent of what Washington has prepared in the event of a Russian invasion, according to a senior administration official who briefed reporters on the condition of anonymity.

The developments came amid a spike in skirmishes in the eastern regions that Western powers believe Russia could use as a pretext for an attack on the western-looking democracy that has defied Moscow’s attempts to pull it back into its orbit.

Putin justified his decision in a far-reaching, pre-recorded speech blaming NATO for the current crisis and calling the U.S.-led alliance an existential threat to Russia.

Sweeping through more than a century of history, he painted today’s Ukraine as a modern construct that is inextricably linked to Russia. He charged that Ukraine had inherited Russia’s historic lands and after the Soviet collapse was used by the West to contain Russia.

“I consider it necessary to take a long-overdue decision: To immediately recognize the independence and

sovereignty of Donetsk People’s Republic and Luhansk People’s Republic,” Putin said.

Afterward he signed a decree recognizing the Donetsk and Luhansk regions’ independence, eight years after fighting erupted between Russia-backed separatists and Ukrainian forces, and called on lawmakers to approve measures paving the way for military support.

Until now, Ukraine and the West have accused Russia of supporting the separatists, but Moscow has denied that, saying that Russians who fought there were volunteers.

At an earlier meeting of Putin’s Security Council, a stream of top officials argued for recognizing the regions’ independence. At one point, one slipped up and said he favored including them as part of Russian territory but Putin quickly corrected him.

Recognizing the separatist regions’ independence is likely to be popular in Russia, where many share Putin’s worldview. Russian state media released images of people in Donetsk launching fireworks, waving large Russian flags and playing Russia’s national anthem.

Ukrainians in Kyiv, meanwhile, bristled at the move.

“Why should Russia recognize (the rebel-held regions)? If neighbors come to you and say, ‘This room will be ours,’ would you care about their opinion or not?”

“It’s your flat, and it will be always your flat,” said Maria Levchyschchyna, a 48-year-old painter in the Ukrainian capital. “Let them recognize whatever they want. But in my view, it can also provoke a war, because normal people will fight for their country.”

With an estimated 150,000 Russian troops massed on three sides of Ukraine, the U.S. has warned that Moscow has already decided to invade. Still, Biden and Putin tentatively agreed to a meeting brokered by French President Emmanuel Macron in a last-ditch effort to avoid war.

If Russia moves in, the meeting will be off, but the prospect of a face-to-face summit resuscitated hopes in diplomacy to prevent a conflict that could cause massive casualties and huge economic damage across Europe, which is heavily dependent on Russian energy.

Putin’s announcement shattered a 2015 peace deal signed in Minsk requiring Ukrainian authorities to offer broad self-rule to the rebel regions, a major diplomatic coup for Moscow.

That deal was resented by many in Ukraine who saw it as a capitulation, a blow to the country’s integrity and a betrayal of national interests.

Over 14,000 people have been killed since conflict erupted in the eastern heartland of Ukraine in 2014.

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