

Barack Obama wants US to accept 10,000 Syrian refugees

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US President Barack Obama has asked for at least 10,000 Syrian refugees to be admitted to the US next year, amid criticism his government has done too little to help.

Spokesman Josh Earnest yesterday said Mr Obama had asked staff to “scale up” the number of refugee admissions, which are likely to total about 1800 in the fiscal year ending September 30.

“He has informed his team that he would like them to make preparations to accept at least 10,000 Syrian refugees in the next fiscal year,” Mr Earnest said.

More than 62,000 Americans have signed a petition calling on Mr Obama’s administration to resettle at least 65,000 Syrians by 2016.

Mr Earnest said the US could not realistically provide sanctuary to the four million Syrians who have fled a brutal civil war. “We know the scale of this problem, and it’s significant, there are millions of people who have been driven from their homes because of this violence,” Mr Earnest said. “What we can do is make sure we are doing anything we can to try to provide for their basic needs.”

The US accepts about 70,000 refugees a year from all conflicts around the world but has been particularly slow to accept Syrians.

Refugees from the country must undergo strict security checks designed to weed out extremists, even after being registered by the UN. “The process to bring refugees here is careful and deliberate,” a senior State Department official said. “It takes between 18 to 24 months between when a refugee is referred to us and when they — if approved — end up arriving in the United States.”

Each refugee and their family is interviewed by the Department of Homeland Security and names are checked against government databases. “What we’re trying to do is weed out people who are liars, who are criminals, or would-be terrorists,” the official said.

Advocacy groups have called on the Obama administration to take in more refugees and do so more quickly. “This is not leadership, it is barely a token contribution given the size and scale of the global emergency,” said Human Rights First’s Eleanor Acer. The US, she said, “should demonstrate its commitment to addressing this crisis by launching a major resettlement effort that would provide protection to at least 100,000 Syrians in the next year”.

But congressional Republicans warned Mr Obama’s plan to “surge” refugees would affect the screening mechanism. Michael McCaul, chairman of the Homeland Security Committee in the House of Representatives, accused Mr Obama of pressing ahead “despite consistent intelligence community and federal law enforcement warnings that we do not have the intelligence needed to vet individuals from the conflict zone”.

He said the best way the US could help would be to oust Syrian leader Bashar al-Assad and defeat Islamic State. “This is the culmination of a failed foreign policy to deal with the threats and now we have a humanitarian crisis on our hands,” he said.