Uruguay Launches Syrian Refugee Resettlement Scheme

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The number of refugees selected to enter the country is small, but it is “a 100 percent solution for each refugee.”

Uruguay officials will travel to Lebanon Friday to pick up the first group of Syrian refugees to resettle in the country, part of a humanitarian operation launched by President Jose “Pepe” Mujica.

The resettlement plan will involve bringing 16 families from Syria, some 120 people, fleeing the violence that erupted in their country in 2012. The first group of 40 will arrive in September and the rest are scheduled to come next year.

Mujica announced the resettlement plan in late April, and since then organizations have been working to create a safe space where the refugees will stay, receive healthcare, education and take Spanish classes.

Javier Miranda, the human rights director of the presidency of Uruguay, will travel to Beirut this week to interview the 16 refugee families who have been pre-selected by the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR).

Miranda admits that the number of refugees Uruguay is taking is a drop in the bucket compared to the thousands who have fled the violence in the country, but said that at least “For each refugee it is a 100 percent solution, and that is key.”

Authorities said that victims of torture, children and families with at least one adult able to work –

particularly in agriculture – were given priority for resettlement.

Foreign Minister Luis Almagro said in a televised address last week that he hopes this will encourage other countries to take similar actions.

"The idea is that this will serve as first aid," said Almagro, who added that "we hope that it can be trigger other countries, depending on their conditions, they can also receive many of these people."

According to recent UNHCR numbers, there are 1.1 million registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon, while another 32,929 await registration.

The UNHCR currently does not operate any camps in Lebanon, so many refugees have to pay for a tent in private camps that are operated on private property.

An independent poll shows that 66 percent of the Uruguayan public support the government initiative to take in Syrian refugees.