US to let in 872 refugees this week

Washington, Jan 31: The US government has granted waivers to let 872 refugees into the country this week, despite President Donald Trump's executive order on Friday temporarily banning entry of refugees from any country, according to an internal Department of Homeland Security document seen by Reuters. A Homeland Security official, speaking on condition of anonymity, confirmed the waivers, noting that the refugees were considered "in transit" and had already been cleared for resettlement before the ban took effect. Refugees preparing for resettlement typically have severed personal ties and relinquished their possessions, leaving them particularly vulnerable if their plans to depart are suddenly cancelled. The waivers, granted by the State Department and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), came amid international protests against Trump's rushed executive order. Critics said the order in some cases was not clearly communicated to the agencies responsible for implementing it. The document did not give the nationalities of the refugees who will be admitted into the US. Over the weekend, non-refugee visitors from several majority-Muslim countries also targeted in Trump's executive order were detained, deported and in some cases blocked from boarding flights to the US.

Alicia Seah, director of public relations and communications at Singapore's Dynasty Travel, said: "Right now people are planning for their March-April holidays. They will put their travel plans (to the United States) on hold at this juncture in time." Singaporeans may either choose to travel to the United States later in the year or explore alternative locations such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada or within Asia, she said.

Trump has argued that vetting of immigrants is needed to protect America from attacks, but critics complain that his order unfairly singles out Muslims and defiles America's historic reputation as a welcoming place for immigrants.

Keysar Trad, president of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils, said Trump's travel restrictions were not only hurting innocent people but were "bringing great damage to his own economy and to the standings of Americans internationally".

"Everyone who has relatives in America, whether they are from the countries listed or not, they are petrified of what this man is going to do to America and to their relatives," Trad told Reuters.

Some education providers had seen early signs of an impact. Rod Jones, CEO of Australian-listed education firm Navitas, said the company had seen a downturn in inquiries for its US-based English language courses.

"We have started to see students back off from the US because of their concerns about potential issues they may face," Jones told analysts on an earnings call.

"But they still want to go somewhere," Jones added, identifying Canada and Australia as important alternatives. "The Canadian Prime Minister has come out and said 'if the US doesn't want you, we'd love to have you' and I think it is the approach of Australia too."

Aulia Adlia, 24, a young professional in the media industry in Jakarta, had been considering the United States as an option for postgraduate study.

"When Trump had a chance of winning the election this made me reconsider going to the States to study. Now that he won, and with the Muslim ban and the new immigration policy, it's becoming even more impossible and unsafe to be in America," Adlia said.

"I'm considering another country where I'll feel safe," she said.