



In Jaleel refugee camp (pictured), the oldest Palestinian camp in Lebanon, the population has more than doubled with the arrival of refugees from Syria. Photo: Luca Sola

RESETTLEMENT OF REFUGEES FROM SYRIA

Increased commitments needed from international community in Geneva

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On 9 December 2014 UNHCR will convene a ministerial level pledging conference in Geneva on resettlement and other forms of humanitarian admission for refugees from Syria.

With little sign of the conflict in Syria abating and over 3.2 million refugees registered in neighbouring countries, more than 30 humanitarian, human rights and refugee organisations are calling for the states attending the conference to commit to offer a safe haven to at least 5 per cent of the projected refugee population by the end of 2015. This would equate to 180,000 refugees being relocated from neighbouring countries by that date.

This commitment would be a lifeline to those refugees resettled. If coupled with an adequate aid response and increased economic support to Syria's neighbours, it would also encourage those countries to keep their borders open to ensure those in Syria can flee the conflict, and could contribute to their stability.

SIGNATORIES

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1. Introduction

On 9 December 2014 UNHCR will convene a ministerial level pledging conference in Geneva on resettlement and other forms of humanitarian admission for refugees from Syria.

There are over 3.2 million refugees registered in neighbouring countries and, with little sign of the conflict in Syria abating, this number is projected to rise to 3.59 million by the end of the year¹. More than 30 humanitarian, human rights and refugee organisations who are responding to this almost unprecedented crisis are calling for the states attending the conference to commit to offer a safe haven to at least 5 per cent of the projected refugee population by the end of 2015. This would equate to around 180,000 vulnerable refugees being relocated to third countries by that date.

Countries outside the region have to date pledged to resettle less than two per cent of the Syrian refugee population – and the timeframe for even these limited commitments to be honoured is unclear². To put that in perspective, over three times as many refugees have fled to Turkey alone since the start of September than the rest of the world have pledged to resettle since the start of the conflict in Syria.

With refugees increasingly desperate and vulnerable, enhanced resettlement and other humanitarian admission options are needed to ensure that refugees with heightened vulnerabilities, protection risks or special needs are able to get the protection and care that they need to survive. Increased resettlement of sufficient scale could also contribute to easing the tremendous strain on host communities, including on public services and infrastructure as well as private shelter.

States that have not historically participated in refugee resettlement, including from the Gulf and Latin America³, should join in the effort and develop resettlement programmes and other forms of humanitarian admissions for refugees.

2. A pressing need: Huge numbers of refugees, increased desperation

Syria has generated one of the biggest refugee crises since the Second World War⁴, and the violence inside the country continues to escalate. An increasing number of those who have fled are desperate and vulnerable. The extraordinary generosity shown by neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Jordan is at breaking point. Refugees and poor host communities are paying the price. Also deeply affected are those civilians

¹ UNHCR, Syria Regional Response Plan mid-year review <http://www.unhcr.org/syriarrp6/midyear/docs/syria-rrp6-midyear-full-report.pdf>

² See IRC and NRC, No Escape: Civilians in Syria Struggle to Find Safety Across Borders. Pledges can often take time to lead to relocation. Once a resettlement submission is made to a specific country, the refugee applicant must go through a complex interview and screening process by the receiving countries.

³ Brazil has launched a humanitarian visa programme for refugees from Syria and has issued 4,200 visas as of November 2014. See UNHCR, Finding Solutions for Syrian Refugees <http://www.unhcr.org/52b2febac5.html>

⁴ More than 5 million people fled Afghanistan in the 1980s and there have been continued flows of refugees over the last two decades, as well as returns of millions of refugees.

trying but often unable to flee the conflict in Syria as neighbouring countries restrict or close their borders.

UNHCR has publicly expressed concerns for people trying to flee relating to the restriction of Jordan's border⁵. In October 2014, only 18,453 refugees from Syria were registered with UNHCR in countries bordering Syria, an 88 per cent drop from the monthly 2013 average, which gives an indication of the extent to which people are increasingly trapped inside Syria.⁶

Box 1: Resettlement, humanitarian admission and asylum: what's the difference?

Resettlement is an option whereby a third country (i.e. not the one the refugee has fled from, or the country of first asylum or habitual residence) offers refugee status to that individual in its territory. For example, this could mean a refugee from Syria living in a camp in Jordan being offered status, and related reception and integration support, in the United States of America⁷.

Humanitarian admission programmes are much like resettlement, but normally involve expedited processing, often without the involvement of UNHCR, and may provide either permanent or temporary stay depending on the legislation or policy of the state offering this option. For example, Germany offered temporary status to hundreds of thousands of Bosnians in the 1990s, who then returned to Bosnia when the war there had finished and it was safe for individuals to do so. Humanitarian admissions criteria are sometimes based on factors other than protection risk or vulnerability, such as existing links to the country offering admission.

Other forms of admission could include allowing Syrian refugees legal access to third countries by relaxing requirements for entry visas to work and study, not necessarily based upon their vulnerabilities.

Asylum: Civilians facing persecution or other risks resulting from armed conflict or massive violations of human rights have a right to flee to safety across international borders and request asylum in another country. States have specific obligations towards asylum seekers under international law, particularly the obligation not to forcibly return them to harm. Many refugees from Syria have sought asylum in countries beyond neighbouring countries. These countries outside the region have the obligation to ensure the right of Syrians to seek asylum at their borders, in addition to responsibility-sharing through increased resettlement.

There has also been an increase in the number of refugees from Syria attempting to claim asylum beyond neighbouring countries, accompanied by more reports of refugees making the risky passage across the Mediterranean in particular, and of detention and ill-treatment of asylum

⁵ See New York Times, *No Syrians Are Allowed Into Jordan, Agencies Say* http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/09/world/middleeast/syrian-refugees-jordan-border-united-nations.html?_r=1 and <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/11/20/world/middleeast/jordans-open-door-is-now-only-cracked-leaving-syrians-stranded.html>. See Government of Lebanon Policy Paper, which states that the border is closed, with a limited number of humanitarian exceptions <http://www.pcm.gov.lb/arabic/subpg.aspx?pageid=6118>

⁶ IRC and NRC, *No Escape* p.4

⁷ Countries participating in the UNHCR global resettlement program generally establish annual resettlement quotas or ceilings which dictate how many refugees they admit under their national resettlement programs each year. UNHCR and resettlement countries have agreed upon a set of criteria which prioritize access to resettlement for refugees with the highest protection risks, vulnerabilities or special needs,

seekers on arrival.⁸ No matter where Syrians are, inside or outside the country, they are increasingly vulnerable.

Wealthy states must do more urgently and, based their economic capacity to host refugees,⁹ offer a safe haven to an equitable number of 5 per cent of the projected population. While 5 per cent is only a fraction of the total number registered in neighbouring countries, it would mean the hope of a better future in safety for nearly 180,000 people. It will also create positive dividends for the remaining 95 per cent of refugees who remain in neighbouring countries, as a result of the easing of the strain on their host communities.

Whilst 180,000 is higher than the 130,000 target that the UNHCR has set, and in a shorter timeframe (by the end of 2015 instead of 2016), both targets are lower than the likely true needs. UNHCR projects that up to 377,000 refugees would currently qualify for resettlement, and that an increasing number are expressing a desire to be resettled as their situation becomes more desperate and prolonged.¹⁰

In addition there are an unknown number of Palestine Refugees from Syria (PRS) across neighbouring countries, who would both need and potentially desire this option. Resettlement or other forms of admissions of 180,000 refugees by the end of 2015 is, in other words, a very conservative commitment by wealthy countries.

A relatively small commitment by wealthy states, in its collective impact, will go a long way. For the UK for example, this country's share of 5 per cent would equate to offering safety to up to 10,000 refugees from Syria, compared to their current disappointing pledge of "several hundred". Germany has committed to offering a safe haven to 30,000 refugees from Syria, an example other countries should follow.

Beyond these 180,000 refugees countries should consider alternatives such as expedited family-based immigration processes, community sponsorship arrangements, academic scholarship opportunities, labor-based immigration opportunities and other options to offer refugees from Syria a legal route to their countries.

3. Ensuring vulnerable individuals are offered resettlement and addressing host state concerns

Prioritising the most vulnerable

An established set of UNHCR criteria give priority to most vulnerable groups such as women at risk, children, medical cases, survivors of trauma or torture, refugees facing immediate security risks, refugees at a heightened

⁸ UNHCR (2014) 'Syrian Refugees in Europe: What Europe Can Do to Ensure Protection and Solidarity' <http://www.refworld.org/docid/53b69f574.html> According to the UNHCR, 123,600 Syrians had sought asylum in 'EU+' countries (the 28 EU member states plus Switzerland, Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein) by July 2014. According to IOM Syrians now make up the largest group of refugees making the risky journey to Italy <https://www.iom.int/cms/en/sites/iom/home/news-and-views/press-briefing-notes/pbn-2014b/pbn-listing/mediterranean-irregular-migrants.html>

⁹ A share of this 5 per cent should be based on a share of collective Gross National Income (GNI), rather than on population, as it indicates whether a country's capacity to support refugees who are relocated. See Oxfam, Fairer Deal for Syrians p. 9. <http://www.oxfam.org/en/research/fairer-deal-syrians>

¹⁰ Email communication with UNHCR, 19 November 2014.

risk of sexual violence or exploitation, and refugees who require resettlement to ensure family unity.

States attending the Geneva conference should prioritise accepting cases based on vulnerability and protection risk rather than on other criteria such as family composition, existence of an anchor relative or sponsor in the resettlement country, or integration potential. UNHCR should also strengthen collaboration with NGO partners who are working to identify individuals and families potentially in need of resettlement, and establish transparent referral mechanisms from NGOs to UNHCR for such cases.

Accepting most vulnerable cases for resettlement relieves neighbouring countries from the short term costs of treating, supporting or protecting particularly vulnerable refugees. The positive impact can also extend to the whole family of vulnerable individuals.

Criteria for humanitarian admission programmes varies by state (see Box 1). However, these alternative programs should also prioritise the vulnerable and must be implemented alongside a firm commitment of states to accept 100 per cent of the cases referred by UNHCR.

Pledges into action

Pledging to resettle refugees from Syria is a vital first step, but translating commitments into action cannot wait. While a number of states have said that they would welcome Syrian refugees, few have delivered. As of November 2014, less than 7,000 refugees had been resettled through UNHCR facilitated programs worldwide

In order to ensure a responsible and speedy scale up to meet these needs governments should give extra support to UNHCR, IOM and other resettlement organisations. This would enable agencies to deploy additional specialized and support staff and other resources needed for the identification and processing of cases.

States need to move quickly to expedite the resettlement selection process, decrease the length of time it takes to screen refugees, and ramp up regional processing capacity. In Lebanon, for example, the US Department of Homeland Security has stopped conducting interviews due to lack of processing space in a security-approved location. This means that for the foreseeable months, the US will not resettle refugees from Lebanon, a country which hosts the most refugees per capita globally.

Addressing concerns of resettlement countries

Governments have expressed security concerns related to refugee arrivals, but these need not and should not prevent states from committing to resettle their fair share of Syrian refugees.

In identifying and selecting cases to refer for resettlement, UNHCR has clear procedures to identify individuals who should be excluded from refugee status.¹¹ Those individuals would not benefit from UNHCR's

¹¹ Article 1 (f) of the 1951 Refugee Convention excludes individuals who have committed war crimes, serious non-political crimes or acts contrary to the purpose and principles of the United Nations.

programs, including resettlement opportunities. In addition, all refugees from Syria offered protection in third countries go through rigorous security screening before being accepted by the receiving countries themselves. These procedures should certainly be rigorous, but at the same time not overly lengthy and burdensome in ways that lead to prolonged delays in processing vulnerable refugees.

More often than not, resettled refugees are net contributors to host societies. While support for refugees is a signal of responsibility sharing and international solidarity there is also significant evidence that resettled refugees contribute both economically and in many other ways to their host countries.¹²

Furthermore, when offered the chance to work in their resettlement country, will be able to send remittances back to extended family in the region, further bolstering the survival capacity of the wider refugee population who do not benefit from resettlement.¹³

The public and civil society in wealthy countries can and must play a key role in generating political will to increase the number of vulnerable refugees from Syria offered a safe haven. Civil society organizations should encourage their governments in order to show that they are eager to welcome Syrian refugees in their communities. This is especially important at local level. In the UK, for example, local councils have to join a humanitarian admission scheme, as they are responsible for providing accommodation and services and overseeing the resettlement process.

4. A key part of the international response, not a panacea

Enhanced resettlement won't solve the refugee crisis or all the issues related to the response to the Syria conflict. But a safe haven to 180,000 of the most vulnerable refugees by the end of next year will go some way to help those individuals, their families and host countries in the region. It will also send a powerful signal of international solidarity, demonstrating to Syria's neighbouring countries that they are not dealing with this refugee crisis alone.

Resettlement programmes should complement fully funded aid responses and viable opportunities for refugees to work in host countries. The international community needs to provide greater economic support for refugees to allow host countries to assist new and existing refugee populations fleeing violence and support vulnerable host communities now impacted by the influx of refugees.

¹² An extensive literature review by the Refugee Council of Australia found that while there are short term costs associated with resettlement "refugees make substantial contributions to their new country – expanding consumer markets for local goods, opening new markets, bringing in new skills, creating employment and filling empty employment niches" highlighting that "the resettlement of refugees is not just an exercise in international goodwill". While focused on Australia, the review covered OECD countries and the EU. Economic, Civic and Social Contributions of Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants – A Literature Review, p.7 http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/docs/resources/Contributions_of_refugees.pdf.

¹³ Remittances from Somali diaspora to their home country, for example amount to approximately \$1.3 bn annually, greater than the entire amount spent on international humanitarian and development assistance for the country. See Oxfam, Adeso and Inter-American Dialogue <http://www.oxfamamerica.org/static/oa4/somalia-remittance-report-web.pdf>

In addition, the international community cannot credibly remind governments in the region of their obligation to keep their borders open without significantly increasing their pledges to host refugees, and delivering on those pledges as quickly as possible.

5. Resettling refugees from Syria must not be at the expense of other vulnerable refugees

Offering a safe haven to refugees from Syria must not be at the expense of refugees from other countries. The sad fact is that, while the number of refugees continues to grow, the number of resettlement places offered by third countries in any given year is not keeping pace with this reality. This is why, in addition to expanding their traditional resettlement programmes, states should also explore all other potential avenues to offer humanitarian admission and other immigration options for the most vulnerable refugees from Syria, given the magnitude of the Syria crisis.

Recommendations:

The states attending the 9 December 2014 conference in Geneva should commit to offering effective international protection to at least 5 per cent of the projected population of refugees from Syria by the end of 2015. To achieve this in a responsible manner they should:

- Either initiate or rapidly expand the resettlement spaces available to Syrian refugees through the UNHCR programme, and develop additional pathways for Syrian admissions through complementary humanitarian admissions programmes;
- Accept 100 per cent of the cases referred by UNHCR based on the established vulnerability criteria;
- Ensure that those resettled or offered other forms of protection are given adequate and ongoing support to integrate into the receiving country. Specialised psycho-social and trauma recovery services need to be offered to survivors of torture, sexual violence and other human rights violations;
- Ensure there is expedited processing for vulnerable refugees from Syria and sufficient resources (staffing and infrastructural) in the region to efficiently process applications. Security screenings should not be overly burdensome and a resettlement candidate should only be denied access based on a clear security threat posed by that individual;
- Offer support to host governments in the region, the UNHCR, IOM and other UN agencies and INGOs to scale up resettlement programmes, in particular to ensure that there are adequate specialised and support staff and related resources for identifying vulnerable refugees who are most in need of resettlement, and preparing, referring and processing their cases;
- Explore innovative ways, beyond the 5 per cent, to provide extra support to refugees from Syria, and access to different avenues for legal residence. This could include offering scholarships and education opportunities or specialised work permits to refugees, while affording them full protections in line with the 1951 Refugee Convention.

This paper was written by a group of humanitarian, human rights and refugee organisations (listed at the beginning of the paper). For further information on the issues raised in this paper, please e-mail: dgorevan@oxfam.org.uk

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