

The future of Refugee Resettlement

Refugee Action is a national charity which works to enable asylum seekers and refugees in the UK to rebuild their lives. We are a leading provider of reception and integration services for resettled refugees in the UK, and we provide advice and support to thousands of asylum seekers and refugees every year.

Refugee resettlement

Refugee resettlement involves the relocation of refugees from a country of asylum to a safe country that has agreed to admit them and ultimately grant them permanent settlement. International coordination of resettlement is delivered through the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR). It is a crucial lifeline for people escaping war and persecution in their own country.

The UK's refugee resettlement schemes have been a lifeline to tens of thousands of people who have come to the UK after escaping some of the world's most brutal conflicts and regimes, and provides a safe, legal and managed route by which people can come to the UK. The success of the Vulnerable Person's Resettlement Scheme (VPRS) has ensured our place as a world leader in resettlement, benefiting nearly 20,000 refugees affected by the Syrian conflict between 2015 and 2020. Refugee resettlement has changed the lives of many vulnerable people across the world.

An uncertain future

Despite this, there are still unresolved questions about the immediate future for those refugees who are awaiting safe passage to the UK right now, and those who will need our help in the future:

- The end of current funding commitments. The VPRS and the UK's other resettlement schemes are set to end next year. In the summer of 2019, the Government committed to welcoming between 5,000–6,000 refugees in 2020–2021 under a new resettlement scheme consolidating three existing UK programmes: VPRS, the Vulnerable Children's Resettlement Scheme (VCRS) and the Gateway Protection Programme. No further funding beyond March 2021 has yet been announced, despite previous assurances there would be a commitment on this.
- Suspension of flights. Current resettlement programmes have been suspended since March. This means people are still being forced to remain in precarious and often life-threatening situations, despite the re-opening of travel corridors in other contexts.

Short-term and long-term needs

In March 2020, IOM and UNHCR announced that they would be taking steps to suspend resettlement departures for refugees on a temporary basis. No one has been resettled here since the 12th March. At that time, over 600 arrivals had been planned to take place in the coming month. Postponements of scheduled arrivals has had devastating personal consequences for those due to travel. In many cases people, had already sold all their possessions as they believed they would be making the journey soon.

Globally, it is estimated that 26 million people are in need of resettlement. Beyond the need to escape immediate danger in conflict zones, in the long term, thousands of people in refugee camps may face famine and destitution. Estimates suggest that 50% of people in the MENA region, many of whom are self-supporting financially while they await resettlement, have entirely lost their income. Estimates also suggest that there are 669,000 people in need of resettlement in the region, yet the target for those who can be resettled is only 41,000 annually, even in normal times.

Bonheur's Story

Bonheur arrived in the UK through a resettlement scheme in 2018, having fled ongoing conflict and war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and lived in Burundi for two years. Though he and his sister escaped a traumatic situation, in Burundi, they lived in a camp with over 10,000 people in unhygienic conditions. When Bonheur and his sister were resettled, they left behind a life plagued with violence and trauma.

Since arriving in the UK, Bonheur has wanted to contribute to his new community, and has started working as Mental Health Support Worker. During the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, Bonheur continued working to support those at risk, juggling 12-hour shifts with his studies to become a GP.

Bonheur said: "I couldn't just stay at home because I was scared of the pandemic...I want to make a difference in the world. I just want to help people. I feel like my life matters when I can make a difference to people, to make them smile.'

The UK's resettlement programmes offer a lifeline to people like Bonheur, who in turn want to contribute their skills and ambitions to life in the UK.

Resuming resettlement

In order to support the vulnerable refugees in difficult situations across the world, the Government must urgently restart resettlement programmes, and offer safe, managed and legal routes to those fleeing persecution.

Issues which were previously problematic, like the issuing of visas and capacity of local authorities in the UK to continue with resettlement, are no longer blocks as they were at the height of the health crisis. Although there are concerns about infection rates in some regions, large parts of the world have much lower infection rates, and it would now be safe to restart resettlement from these countries.

Many other nations who accept refugees, including Italy, have resumed resettlement flights despite having paused them during Covid-19 lockdowns.

Local authorities and charities delivering refugee resettlement programmes in the UK stand ready to resume. There is no significant reason why we can't again be facilitating the safe arrival of refugees now.

A long-term commitment

Beyond the need for an immediate resumption, the UK must also urgently make spending commitments which secure the future of refugee resettlement for the long term. Government must build on its commitment to resettling another 5,000 people as part of a new, consolidated scheme, as the future of refugee resettlement in the UK remains uncertain after this.

While delays in taking a decision on resettlement's long term future persist, it is likely that there will be funding difficulties for those involved in the provision of refugee resettlement support; costs have already been committed for new arrivals, and organisations will need support while resettlement cannot continue. Many organisations involved in resettling refugees were already preparing for the change to the new, consolidated refugee resettlement scheme, and these plans will now be heavily disrupted. Those organisations that provide services supporting people's wellbeing and integration in the UK are vital to the success of refugee integration. Similarly, when flights resume, momentum

will need to once again be generated to gain new commitments and pledges for the new, consolidated one-year scheme that is still due to start.

Recommendations

- 1) **Urgently restart resettlement:** The Government must urgently restart resettlement flights and complete the 20,000 target set for the VPRS, as soon as possible. The Home Office must work with local authorities and charities who deliver resettlement to organise for its resumption.

- 2) **Ensure the long term future of UK refugee resettlement:** The Government must urgently make spending commitments which secure the future of refugee resettlement for the long term and enact last year's commitment to resettle 5,000 people as part of a new, consolidated scheme. There should also be financial support for organisations involved in resettlement. To be a leader on supporting refugees as the new, Global Britain, we should continue to set an example to other nations by maintaining this hugely important programme.

For more information on refugee resettlement, please contact marias@refugee-action.org.uk