



Hannan Hassan Khalaf, 20, sits with her daughter and son in the tent in which she and her family live at an informal settlement for Syrian refugees near the town of Baalbek in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley, in January 2016. Photo: Sam Tarling/Oxfam

RESETTLING 10 PERCENT OF SYRIAN REFUGEES

The commitment needed at the Geneva conference

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The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is organising a 'High-level meeting on global responsibility sharing through pathways for admission of Syrian refugees', which will be opened by the United Nations Secretary-General in Geneva on 30 March 2016. Oxfam is calling for the states attending the Geneva conference to collectively commit to offer a safe haven through resettlement or other forms of humanitarian admission to at least 10 percent of the refugee population – the equivalent of 481,220 people – by the end of 2016.

INTRODUCTION

The crisis in Syria entered its sixth year in March 2016. In the previous year, despite recent progress with a partial cessation of hostilities and resumption of political negotiations, civilians were still being targeted and besieged, humanitarian assistance failed to reach huge numbers of people in need, and attacks on hospitals and schools continued. The violence in Syria has created a massive refugee crisis, with over 4.8 million people registered in neighbouring countries. At the same time these countries, including Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon, have struggled to offer adequate levels of services and protection to refugees, leading to an increasing number of vulnerable people. Syrians also continue to risk their lives by taking unsafe routes to Europe. Since 2014, more than 7,500 people, including many children, have died trying to cross the Mediterranean on flimsy boats.

It is in this context that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) is organising a 'High-level meeting on global responsibility sharing through pathways for admission of Syrian refugees', which will be opened by the United Nations Secretary-General in Geneva on 30 March 2016. To date the response to calls of increased resettlement of vulnerable refugees has been disappointing, and the conference is an opportunity for states to mark a change of course.

Oxfam is calling for the states attending the Geneva conference to collectively commit to offer a safe haven through resettlement or other forms of humanitarian admission to at least 10 percent of the refugee population – the equivalent of 481,220 people – by the end of 2016. This corresponds to the number of refugees UNHCR has identified as vulnerable. Providing resettlement spaces does not excuse countries, whether Syria's neighbours or rich states, for closing their borders to Syrians seeking asylum from conflict at home. Moreover, resettlement cannot be used as a bargaining chip in political deals. It is about providing a home to vulnerable refugees, not a method for managing migration or justifying harsh asylum policies.

RESETTLEMENT FOR 10 PERCENT OF THE REFUGEE POPULATION BY END OF 2016

Resettling at least 10 percent of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees: Both urgent and possible

There are close to 5 million Syrians registered as refugees in neighbouring countries. In the past year alone, nearly a million more Syrians fled their homes and are now internally displaced or living in Syria's neighbours. The generosity shown by the communities of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan for years has resulted in massive impacts on public service provision and their economies. Authorities in these countries have taken measures to restrict the arrival of Syrians. At the border with Jordan, more than 44,000 Syrians are stranded in a no man's land with little to no humanitarian aid or services. And at the Turkish border, at least 30,000 Syrians remain in search of safety.

While humanitarian funding pledges made at the London donor conference in February are promising and commitments made by refugee-hosting governments to provide work opportunities and ease restrictions are welcome, the reality is that funds will not be enough to match the growing needs, and an increasing number of refugees will become increasingly vulnerable.

UNHCR has estimated that 10 percent of refugees are very vulnerable and in need of resettlement, and several international organisations have called for 10 percent to be resettled by the end of 2016.¹ The response to this call has been disappointing. Traditional resettlement countries like the US are not pulling their weight. President Barack Obama has pledged to resettle just 10,000 Syrian refugees between October 2015 and September 2016, but nearly halfway through that timeframe, fewer than 1,000 Syrians have arrived out of a total of fewer than 3,000 who have been resettled to the US since January 2013. The British government has offered to resettle 20,000 refugees by 2020. If spread across the UK, that would mean each of its 69 cities receives around 60 refugees per year.

Germany and Canada have both shown that where there is political will there is a way to offer this lifeline to desperate refugees, each resettling or providing humanitarian admissions to at least 26,000 in a relatively short timeframe.

Ensuring the most vulnerable can access resettlement: Unregistered refugees and others fleeing the conflict in Syria, including Palestine refugees

Resettlement and other forms of humanitarian admission are for vulnerable refugees. Governments committing places to refugees, as well as UNHCR, must ensure that particularly vulnerable groups – such as refugees who are not registered with UNHCR, or Palestine refugees from Syria – are not excluded.

Unregistered refugees

Only Syrian nationals currently registered with UNHCR are eligible for resettlement through the majority of existing mechanisms. This excludes a considerable number of Syrians currently in Lebanon who did not register prior to 5 January 2016 or entered the country after this date, when the UNHCR registration process was effectively suspended at the request of the Lebanese government, leaving thousands in Lebanon unregistered. This lack of registration is in itself a cause of vulnerability, meaning the very people who may need resettlement the most are unable to access it.

Palestine refugees from Syria

There are at least 60,000 Palestine refugees from Syria² across neighbouring countries who would both urgently need and potentially desire the resettlement option. They face challenges in countries like Lebanon and Jordan, including limited access to basic services, employment, limitations on mobility, additional obstacles in maintaining valid registration and legal status, and in some cases risk of deportation. Palestine refugees from Syria have been formally banned from entering Jordan since January 2013, and in Lebanon, they faced restrictions entering the country long before Syrians. Many of them who have managed to stay in neighbouring countries live in Palestine refugee camps that are already dense and overpopulated.

Other safe and legal routes: Resettlement of vulnerable refugees must not be politically manipulated

Currently, legal routes to seek protection outside of Syria's immediate region are very limited. The recent agreement between the EU and Turkey fails to respect the spirit of international law, as well as EU, and could amount to trading human beings for political concessions.³ Commitments to resettle refugees must not be used to limit routes for refugees seeking safety spontaneously, justify harsh asylum policies or limit numbers of refugees arriving in third countries, particularly in Europe.

Instead, governments should offer other forms of admission not based on vulnerability, such as scholarships or work schemes. Beyond the 480,000 refugees Oxfam is asking rich countries to resettle, countries should provide other safe and legal pathways such as expedited and expanded family reunification programs, community sponsorship arrangements, academic scholarship opportunities, labour-based immigration opportunities and other options.

Countries participating in the Geneva meeting should also consider introducing humanitarian visas so that people are able to claim asylum in a country through its local embassy or representative body, and without being physically present in that country. Humanitarian visa programmes, like the one piloted by Brazil, would allow people to travel to third countries and seek asylum without having to take dangerous journeys that put their lives at risk. For those refugees that do arrive irregularly to Europe, countries must efficiently assess their claim to asylum and afford them the same dignified treatment defined for refugees arriving through legal pathways so that they are able to exercise their rights under international law.

Table 1: Resettlement fair share figures

Oxfam is calling for 10 percent of the number of refugees registered by UNHCR in neighbouring countries, equivalent to about 480,000 people, to be resettled or offered humanitarian admission in rich countries that have signed the UN Refugee Convention by the end of 2016. This chart looks at admissions and pledges from these countries since 2013 against a fair share calculated on the basis of the size of their economy. To date, only 129,966 places have been pledged by the world's richest governments, some in an unclear timeframe. Of the total number of pledges, only 1.39% actually arrived in third countries.⁴

Country	Number of pledges	Fair share (no. of persons) Rounded up to the nearest whole number	% of fair share contributed
Australia*	6727	10557	64%
Austria	1900	4009	47%
Belgium	1325	4773	28%
Canada	38039	15951	239%
Czech Republic	70	2795	3%
Denmark	390	2601	15%
Finland	1900	2247	85%
France	1000	25937	4%
Germany	41899	36869	114%
Greece	0	3085	0%
Iceland	75	118	63%
Ireland**	721	1774	41%
Italy	1400	21519	7%
Japan	0	49768	0%

Key

- >90% fair share contributed
- 50–90% contributed
- <50% contributed

Korea, Republic of	0	16650	0%
Luxembourg	60	376	16%
Netherlands	545	7857	7%
New Zealand	850	1419	60%
Norway	9000	3612	249%
Poland	900	8771	10%
Portugal	48	2805	2%
Russia	0	35052	0%
Slovakia	0	1440	0%
Spain	984	16037	6%
Sweden	2700	4515	60%
Switzerland	2000	4837	41%
United Kingdom***	5571	25067	22%
United States****	11812	170779	7%
TOTAL	129,966	481,220	n/a

Note: Information is drawn from publicly available sources including UNHCR and checked with government representatives where possible. Data is correct as of 22 March 2016.

***Australia:** The government has pledged to resettle an additional 12,000 refugees who are fleeing Syria and Iraq. It is now clear that these places will be delivered over multiple years. As at 18 March, only 26 people had arrived and 1,600 visas had been granted. Oxfam has only included these people. In addition, the Australian Government has allocated 4,850 places to Syrians and Iraqis in its regular humanitarian intake to be delivered by 30 June 2016 which has been included. Oxfam has assumed that all of these places are split equally between Syrians and Iraqis. Finally, the number used here includes Syrians who have been resettled to Australia between January 2013 and June 2015.

****Ireland:** In addition to the 721, Ireland has also resettled 35 refugees not of Syrian origin displaced by the conflict. Additional refugees may be received in Ireland but a final decision has not been taken on whether this will be resettlement or relocation.

*****UK:** The figure number is based on the monthly average for resettled refugees required to fulfil the UK commitment to resettle 20,000 Syrians by May 2020. It also includes 216 Syrians who have been resettled via the Vulnerable Relocations Scheme.

******USA:** The US has pledged to accept at least 10,000 Syrian refugees from October 2015 to September 2016 within an overall admission ceiling of 85,000 refugees. The pledge number is based on this 10,000 plus the 1,812 Syrians who have been resettled to the US between January 2013 and September 2015.

NOTES

- 1 Right to a Future, Empowering refugees from Syria and host governments to face a long term crisis, Joint NGO report, 9 November 2015, https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp-right-to-future-syria-refugees-091115-en.pdf
- 2 2016 Syrian Regional Crisis Emergency Appeal, United Nations Relief and Works Agency, p.1.
- 3 Oxfam, EU and Turkey deal trades human beings for political concessions, 18 March 2016. <https://www.oxfam.org/en/pressroom/reactions/eu-and-turkey-deal-trades-human-beings-political-concessions>
- 4 67,108 Syrian refugees have been resettled since 2013 according to information drawn from publicly available sources including UNHCR and checked with government sources where possible

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This paper was written by Alexandra Saieh with the assistance of Joelle Bassoul, Daniel Gorevan and colleagues across the Oxfam confederation. It is part of a series of papers written to inform public debate on development and humanitarian policy issues. For further information on the issues raised in this paper please e-mail asaieh@oxfaminternational.org

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