

High-level meeting on global responsibility sharing through pathways for admission of Syrian refugees

Geneva, 30 March 2016

Background Note

Introduction

The conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic has resulted in one of the worst humanitarian and displacement crises in decades, forcing over 4.6 million Syrians across borders and displacing an estimated 6.5 million internally. Neighbouring countries, including Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey, continue to host the largest numbers of Syrian refugees. With no current opportunity for safe and sustainable return to the Syrian Arab Republic, the exhaustion of personal resources, and the deterioration of living conditions in host countries after five years of conflict, many Syrian refugees have moved further afield, particularly to Europe. In 2015, Syrians represented 49 per cent of the over 1 million people who risked their lives crossing the Mediterranean. Resources are also increasingly strained in host countries where the majority of refugees still remain.

In November 2015, the United Nations Secretary-General announced a progressive roadmap to address the continued pressures on host countries and the range of humanitarian concerns entailed by the onward movements of refugees. As part of this roadmap, and with a view to addressing the Syrian refugee crisis, the Secretary-General requested that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees convene a ministerial-level meeting to garner increased support for refugees as well as host countries through concrete pledges for resettlement and other forms of admission of Syrian refugees. This event will take place in Geneva on 30 March 2016 and will feed into a High-Level Plenary Meeting of the United Nations General Assembly on Addressing Large Movements of Refugees and Migrants, which will be held in New York on 19 September 2016, and which is intended to secure global commitments to addressing humanitarian needs of refugees and migrants.

Scope and objectives

The primary objective of the event on 30 March 2016 will be to secure pledges for increased opportunities for admission of Syrian refugees. Such pledges would build on the significant efforts that have already been made by a number of States, and the meeting will showcase innovative initiatives that have been developed to provide pathways for the safe and dignified admission of refugees.

Against this background, States may pledge to:

1. Create or expand *humanitarian pathways* for admission, which are specifically designed to provide protection to refugees with compelling needs. Humanitarian pathways for admission may include resettlement/humanitarian admission, private sponsorships, humanitarian visas, and medical evacuation;
2. Facilitate access to *additional pathways* for admission, by creating or expanding opportunities for Syrian refugees to access safety and protection through admission of relatives, academic scholarships and apprenticeships, and labour mobility schemes, or by relaxing or removing certain legal barriers or administrative requirements for admission.

Building on existing pledges, the target is to secure pathways for at least 10 per cent of the Syrian refugee population over the next three years.

In response to UNHCR's previous calls, highlighting that 10 per cent of Syrian refugees were estimated to be in need of resettlement, some 30 countries have generously made humanitarian pathways for admission available to more than 162,000 refugees to date. However, the conflict continues unabated, Syrians continue to flee their country, host communities are overstretched, and the living conditions for Syrian refugees have further deteriorated. Given these circumstances, the 10 per cent target for the provision of pathways for admission should not be viewed as the final goal. Rather, it is an important milestone to be secured over the next three years.

There is an urgent need for the international community to re-commit to the fundamental principle of international cooperation to share responsibility for refugees more equitably. Resettlement is the traditional procedure through which UNHCR identifies and assists refugees with specific needs and vulnerabilities to move from host countries to other States. While resettlement can help to shoulder a portion of the responsibility falling on host countries, which typically provide protection to large numbers of refugees, there are other mechanisms to facilitate protection and solidarity. Pathways for admission may include any mechanism which allows for legal entry to and stay within a third country. In addition to serving as a concrete expression of responsibility sharing, humanitarian or additional pathways for admission can reduce the need for refugees to resort to irregular and dangerous onward movements. Such pathways also allow destination States to put in place proper screening and facilitation procedures for refugees arriving on their territory.

Pathways for admission

States may consider pledging to admit Syrian refugees through a variety of pathways. Humanitarian pathways, such as resettlement and other humanitarian admission programmes, private sponsorship programmes for individuals in humanitarian need, special humanitarian visas, and medical evacuation, are designed to provide protection for refugees with compelling needs. In addition, other pathways which may not be specifically based on protection vulnerabilities *per se* may equally advance protection and solutions for refugees and serve as an important expression of solidarity. Such pathways may include family reunification, including for extended family members, labour mobility schemes, and academic scholarships and apprenticeships.

The following section contains a non-exhaustive list of pathways for admission, which States could consider implementing to provide safety and protection for Syrian refugees.

Humanitarian pathways

1. Resettlement / Humanitarian Admission

Resettlement and humanitarian admission programmes are crucial for refugees whose life, liberty, safety, health, or other human rights are at risk, and resettlement in particular is one of the durable solutions that UNHCR traditionally pursues in cooperation with States. Resettlement and humanitarian admission entail the transfer of refugees from a State in which they have sought protection to a third State that has agreed to admit them either permanently or on a temporary basis. Under these programmes, States ensure protection against refoulement and provide refugees with access to civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights similar to those enjoyed by nationals, as well as, where appropriate, the opportunity to become a citizen in accordance with national laws. Refugees referred for humanitarian admission may benefit from expedited processing by States. Depending on national legislation, humanitarian admission may be provided to specific categories of refugees, such as socio-economically vulnerable persons, family members, individuals with previous links to a country, or persons with medical needs.

With regard to resettlement/ humanitarian admission, States may consider pledging to:

- *Establish or increase a multi-annual additional resettlement or humanitarian admission programme for Syrian refugees to ensure sustainability and predictability in programming.*
- *Increase allocations of resettlement or humanitarian admission quotas to respond to emergency needs, as well as to facilitate the resettlement of refugees from locations where access to the refugees is a serious challenge.*
- *Adopt more flexible criteria for resettlement and humanitarian admission programmes (e.g., avoiding integration criteria or considering the inclusion of larger numbers of individuals with medical needs).*

2. Humanitarian visas

Humanitarian visa programmes, such as those introduced by Argentina, Brazil, France, Italy, Sweden, and Switzerland, provide Syrian refugees with access to a third country and/or the opportunity to apply for asylum. Those who travel to a third country on a humanitarian visa may be granted asylum-seeker or refugee status upon arrival. They may also be provided with access to expedited asylum procedures. Humanitarian visas, which are issued at the discretion of individual States, have proven useful in assisting extended family members who would not otherwise qualify for family reunification, and for other vulnerable refugees.

3. Private sponsorship

Private sponsorship programmes draw on private and community resources to enable refugees to be resettled with the support of private citizens, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), or other interested groups, such as local authorities or faith-based groups. Under these programmes, refugee applicants are identified directly by their sponsors. Private sponsorship programmes, such as those implemented by Australia and Canada, can create bonds between refugees, community-based organizations and receiving communities, and can be implemented alongside or in conjunction with government resettlement programmes. Private sponsorship can also enable refugees to reunite with extended family members who may not otherwise qualify for family reunification. Sponsors may take responsibility for some of the costs associated with resettlement, reception, and integration support in the community, extending the country's capacity to support refugees.

With regard to humanitarian visas and private sponsorship, States may consider pledging to:

- *Explore possibilities to establish a humanitarian visa or community-based private sponsorship programme for Syrian refugees. This could be in partnership with UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM), and civil society.*
- *Adopt flexible criteria and measures (including on the financial threshold and the number of sponsors) for private sponsorship programmes for Syrian refugees.*
- *Provide a travel fund for refugees issued with humanitarian visas or supported through private sponsorship who may need assistance in departing.*
- *Issue or accept travel documents in lieu of a passport for Syrian refugees eligible for humanitarian visas or private sponsorship.*

4. Medical evacuation

Medical evacuation procedures provide for the admission of refugees with urgent medical needs that may be successfully treated in a third country. Medical needs can give rise to protection challenges as families must balance the costs of medical treatment against other essential needs such as food, rent, and education. The admission of those with serious medical conditions is also a concrete expression of responsibility sharing with host countries. Medical evacuation programmes may facilitate the admission of refugees with medical needs as part of resettlement, humanitarian admission, humanitarian visa or other programmes, along with their families who are a key source of support.

With regard to medical evacuation, States may consider pledging to:

- *Admit Syrian refugees with serious medical conditions as part of resettlement, humanitarian admission, humanitarian visa or other programmes, along with their family members.*

Additional pathways

1. Admission of relatives

Relatives who do not fall within the scope of existing family reunification criteria are often faced with obstacles in reuniting with their family members abroad. Streamlined procedures and programmes for admission of relatives of Syrians already residing in a third country can complement and expand on current family reunification mechanisms. For example, facilitated access to embassies, visa waivers, assistance with admission procedures, and easing of documentary requirements could be considered. Several States have provided opportunities for the admission of relatives of Syrians who do not qualify for family reunification under ordinary criteria.

2. Labour mobility schemes

Labour mobility opportunities provide for the authorized onward movement of Syrian refugees to third countries to pursue employment. Labour mobility schemes may form part of traditional migration channels or may be established specifically for Syrian refugees. Access to employment facilitates the re-establishment of a normal life following displacement, and helps refugees to live in dignity and attain an adequate standard of living. Work also provides refugees with the possibility of contributing to the development of their host country and community, as well as to their country of origin. If strategically planned and managed, labour mobility schemes can help States to meet their labour market needs and foster innovation and skills transfer. In establishing labour mobility schemes, States and employers need to ensure that Syrian refugees are not disadvantaged due to their specific situation, such as lack of documentation or the need for accreditation of their qualifications.

3. Academic scholarships and apprenticeship programmes

Academic scholarships and apprenticeship programmes provide a mechanism for eligible Syrian refugees to study or to continue their education or vocational training. Academic scholarship or apprenticeship programmes, similar to those in Canada, the Czech Republic and Spain, can involve universities or polytechnic institutions, governments and civil society working together to develop and fund relevant arrangements. Programmes may provide funding for travel, accommodation, subsistence, and tuition for the duration of the individual's studies or apprenticeship, as well as travel documentation and an appropriate legal status in the receiving country. During or upon completion of these programmes, refugees may have the right to apply for asylum or to request an extension of their residence permits, and may be allowed to obtain a work authorization. Academic scholarship and apprenticeship programmes need to take into consideration the specific challenges facing Syrian refugees, including lack of documentation and academic certificates.



UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

With regard to additional pathways, States may consider pledging to:

- *Explore possibilities for establishing additional pathways for admission of Syrian refugees through admission of extended family members, labour mobility schemes or scholarship and apprenticeship programmes, in close collaboration with the private sector, academic institutions, and civil society.*
- *Develop streamlined mechanisms to facilitate access of Syrian refugees to such additional pathways for admission (for example, through facilitated access to embassies, standardizing qualification assessments, or providing fee waivers or sliding fee scales).*
- *Remove legal and administrative barriers specific to refugees which may preclude refugees from taking up additional pathways (including easing or removing certain documentary, legal status, or return to country of asylum/home country requirements).*
- *Introduce legal safeguards to ensure that refugees can benefit from additional pathways without jeopardising their refugee status, as well as their right to seek international protection or to family reunification.*

25 January 2016

Summary of Suggested Pledges

States may consider pledging to:

Resettlement/ humanitarian admission

- *Establish or increase a multi-annual additional resettlement or humanitarian admission programme for Syrian refugees to ensure sustainability and predictability in programming.*
- *Increase allocations to respond to emergency needs, as well as to facilitate the resettlement of refugees from locations where access to the refugees poses a serious challenge.*
- *Adopt more flexible criteria for resettlement and humanitarian admission programmes (e.g., avoiding integration criteria or considering the inclusion of larger numbers of individuals with medical needs).*

Private sponsorship

- *Explore possibilities to establish a humanitarian visa or community-based private sponsorship programme for Syrian refugees. This could be in partnership with UNHCR, IOM, and civil society.*
- *Adopt flexible criteria and measures (including on the financial threshold and the number of sponsors) for private sponsorship programmes for Syrian refugees.*
- *Provide a travel fund for refugees issued with humanitarian visas or supported through private sponsorship who may need assistance in departing.*
- *Issue or accept travel documents in lieu of a passport for Syrian refugees eligible for humanitarian visas or private sponsorship.*

Medical evacuation

- *Create a medical evacuation programme for Syrian refugees, providing for their admission along with their family members.*
- *Admit Syrian refugees with serious medical conditions as part of resettlement, humanitarian admission, humanitarian visa or other programmes, along with their family members.*

Additional pathways

- *Explore possibilities for establishing additional pathways for admission of Syrian refugees through admission of extended family members, labour mobility schemes or scholarship and apprenticeship programmes, in close collaboration with the private sector, academic institutions, and civil society.*
- *Develop streamlined mechanisms to facilitate access of Syrian refugees to such additional pathways for admission (for example, through facilitated access to embassies, standardizing qualification assessments, or providing fee waivers or sliding fee scales).*
- *Remove legal and administrative barriers specific to refugees which may preclude refugees from taking up additional pathways (including easing documentary, legal status, or return to country of asylum/home country requirements).*
- *Introduce legal safeguards to ensure that refugees can benefit from additional pathways without jeopardising their refugee status, as well as their right to seek international protection or to family reunification.*
- *Share best practices and data on the numbers of refugees benefitting from such programs, as an expression of solidarity.*