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**FAMILY REUNIFICATION IN THE CONTEXT OF  
RESETTLEMENT AND INTEGRATION**

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**FAMILY REUNIFICATION**

1. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights proclaims that “The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State” (Article 16(3)). Through the resettlement of refugees who are separated from family members, refugee resettlement programs have a long and highly commendable tradition of promoting family unity. Yet all too often resettlement programs are prone to being administered in ways which either restrict opportunities for refugee families to reunite or unduly drag out the waiting time before reunification can occur.
2. The benefits of family reunification are obvious. Indeed, they are at the core of protection. Through resettlement, refugees are rescued from danger. Victims of persecution who have had to leave everything behind are at last rejoined with their relatives.
3. Similarly, as was emphasized two months ago at the *International Conference on the Reception and Integration of Resettled Refugees (ICRIRR)* in Sweden, family reunion is also a core element of successful refugee integration. For family members already in the country of resettlement, many of whom are themselves recently-arrived refugees, reunification with their loved ones removes what is for many their major source of anxiety and emptiness. Once reunified, families can turn their faces forward and fully devote their energies to starting over, making new lives in their new country. Countries of resettlement therefore also benefit from family reunification, because the rejoined families are stronger, more likely to achieve self-sufficiency, and less likely to require long-term social assistance.
4. Critics of family-based resettlement claim it is too susceptible to “relationship fraud” to be used as a means of accessing resettlement procedures. In any resettlement program, fraud and corruption need to be aggressively addressed in order to preserve the integrity of the process. However, eliminating or restricting legitimate family reunions because of concerns of “fraud” would be an over-reaction that would undermine international obligations under numerous human rights instruments to promote family unity. Rather than restricting family reunion, states and NGOs should work together to combat family reunion fraud.
5. Some voices in resettlement countries maintain that UNHCR should itself promote the uniting of families through individual resettlement referrals. UNHCR’s response is that international instruments make clear that family reunification is an obligation of states. Moreover, says UNHCR, states are more competent than UNHCR at verifying family relationships. Our own observation is that UNHCR’s scarce resources, both

financial and personnel, render the agency ineffective at promoting family reunification. Thus, notwithstanding UNHCR's responsibility for the protection of all refugees, resettlement countries should promote family reunification through their own procedures without unnecessarily involving UNHCR. UNHCR has indicated that it would welcome such a policy, both on humanitarian grounds and in order to free up precious refugee determination resources for other refugees.

6. These observations are made in conclusion:

- Resettlement countries should assertively promote and facilitate the reunification of refugee families.
- A generous, culturally sensitive and flexible definition of family should be applied.
- Family reunification procedures should be simple and speedy, with special urgency when minor children are involved.
- States and NGOs should work more closely together to ensure the integrity of family reunification procedures, with UNHCR facilitating international exchanges of good practices addressing this challenge.
- Family reunification should be a high resettlement priority for all concerned: UNHCR, governments, and NGOs.