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Resettlement and complementary pathways

Summary

This paper provides an update on efforts to secure third-country solutions for refugees through resettlement and complementary pathways for admission since the last report on solutions (EC/70/SC/CRP.12) presented to the 75th meeting of the Standing Committee in June 2019. It is framed within the commitment of the Global Compact on Refugees to expand access to third-country solutions. The paper highlights challenges in achieving the goals set out in the “Three-year strategy (2019-2021) on resettlement and complementary pathways”. It should be read in conjunction with the Note on International Protection (EC/71/SC/CRP.9).

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I. Introduction

1. In 2019, two key milestones were reached towards increasing third-country solutions for refugees, namely: the launch of the “Three-year strategy (2019-2021) on resettlement and complementary pathways”, as envisaged in the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR); and the first Global Refugee Forum (GRF), which generated some 78 pledges made by governments, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the private sector in support of resettlement and complementary pathways. These significant advances demonstrated a firm commitment to protecting refugees, particularly those at risk, by reaffirming resettlement as a critical protection tool and opening up other legal avenues for refugees to access educational and employment opportunities in a third country. Resettlement and other complementary pathways are tangible mechanisms for more equitable burden- and responsibility-sharing that have remained at the heart of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees for nearly seventy years.

2. The strategy’s vision of expanding opportunities for third-country solutions to three million refugees through resettlement (1 million) and complementary pathways (2 million) by 2028 is ambitious, and major challenges remain in achieving its targets. While the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has undoubtedly added an additional layer of complexity, UNHCR remains committed to working with States, NGOs, refugees and other partners to realize the strategy’s three mutually reinforcing goals: (1) to grow resettlement; (2) to advance complementary pathways; and (3) to build the foundation for welcoming and inclusive societies.

II. Towards growing resettlement

3. In 2019, UNHCR submitted nearly 82,000 refugees to 29 States for consideration, and some 64,000 refugees were resettled. This represented a modest increase from 2018 and surpassed the strategy’s target of 60,000 for the year. Nevertheless, it constitutes less than 5 per cent of the 1.4 million refugees determined to be in need of resettlement in 2019.

4. More than 75 per cent of the refugees submitted in 2019 for resettlement originated from five countries: Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Eritrea, Somalia and the Syrian Arab Republic. The largest number of UNHCR-facilitated resettlement departures in 2019 were from five refugee-hosting countries: Turkey (10,600), Lebanon (8,400), Jordan (5,500), the United Republic of Tanzania (4,000) and Egypt (4,000). Women and girls comprised half of those submitted for resettlement, and more than half of those resettled were children.

5. The United States of America accepted the largest number of refugees for resettlement, followed by Canada and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, two countries that have significantly expanded their resettlement programmes in recent years. The number of departures to Germany rose by 44 per cent in 2019, and UNHCR increased submissions to Australia by nearly 70 per cent.

6. In addition, lifesaving mechanisms for transferring people and resettling them were expanded. More than 1,200 individuals, who had been previously evacuated out of Libya, were resettled through the emergency transfer mechanism in Niger and a second facility in Rwanda, which opened in September 2019. In Central America, the protection transfer arrangement mechanism continued to provide people at risk with safe and legal access to a resettlement country. Over 1,000 individuals were transferred to Costa Rica from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras, including 716 who departed to five resettlement countries.

7. In August 2019, a new priority situations core group was established with Ireland and Sweden as co-chairs. The group aims to optimize the strategic impact of resettlement for refugees at risk in countries affected by the conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic and the central Mediterranean situation, and to facilitate cooperation between States and UNHCR.

8. With support from Portugal, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States of America, UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) worked together on the Emerging Resettlement Countries Joint Support Mechanism (ERCM) and succeeded in expanding resettlement in Argentina, Brazil and Chile over the implementation period of 2016-2019. As a result, over 200 refugees were resettled in the three countries.

9. Following the conclusion of the ERCM in September 2019, UNHCR and IOM drew upon the lessons learned from that experience to launch the Sustainable Resettlement and Complementary Pathways Initiative (CRISP), a succeeding platform for collaboration. The CRISP is designed to serve as a tool for the implementation of the strategy. It aims to provide a tangible way for States to support the expansion of third-country solutions and help realize the contributions and pledges made towards the GCR's objective in this regard. The CRISP will do this through targeted capacity building for States and key actors and enhanced coordination and partnerships.

10. By the end of April, some 10,000 refugees had been resettled in 2020. In mid-March, travel restrictions and border closures implemented to curb the COVID-19 pandemic caused a temporary halt in resettlement departures. Furthermore, lockdowns and movement restrictions in many countries affected UNHCR's capacity to interview refugees and to prepare resettlement submissions. Some refugees with immediate protection needs requiring emergency resettlement continued to depart, albeit in small numbers. Innovative interviewing modalities and selection measures are being tested, so as to resume and rapidly expand resettlement activities once access is granted and movement restrictions are lifted. UNHCR is working closely with States and partners to ensure that mechanisms and procedures are ready to resume resettlement activities, including departures, as soon as circumstances permit.

11. In 2019, the Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement (ATCR) marked 25 years of support to resettlement outcomes under the theme of "Celebrating the positive impact of resettlement and providing inspiration for the future." The 2020 ATCR, organized by Canada, the Canadian Council for Refugees and UNHCR, has been held virtually due to the COVID-19 pandemic. It has brought together a myriad of stakeholders committed to supporting resettlement and exploring opportunities for complementary pathways. UNHCR will work with States and partners to ensure that the ATCR reflects a multi-stakeholder approach, as set out in the GCR. This will be done through fostering diversity in the base of support for resettlement and complementary pathways and placing refugees front and centre as active participants in crafting the outcomes that best address their needs.

12. Analysing resettlement trends and the possible impact of the COVID-19 mitigation measures, it can be expected that the number of refugees who will be resettled in 2020 will decline. Despite some positive developments in recent years, it might be the lowest figure of the last 10 years.

III. Advancing complementary pathways

13. Comprehensive data is not yet available to determine how many refugees benefitted from complementary pathways in 2019. An update to the joint study by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and UNHCR on third-country solutions for refugees indicated a slight decline in the number of permits issued by OECD countries for family reunification, employment and education purposes in 2017 and 2018. Nevertheless, the number of such permits granted in 2018 still surpassed the annual average in previous years.¹

¹ Data collection for this study focused on permits (related to complementary pathways) issued between 2010 and 2018 by OECD member countries to nationals originating from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Iraq, Somalia and the Syrian Arab Republic. The five nationality groups combined account for more than half of the world's refugees and have high rates of asylum recognition in OECD countries. Data was collected directly from OECD countries based on entry and visa permits issued for the first time linked to family reunification, work and education.

14. UNHCR published the report: “Complementary pathways for admission of refugees to third countries: key considerations” in April 2019. It aimed to establish a common understanding of complementary pathways by providing concrete examples and highlighting protection safeguards. In addition, the report proposed ways to increase the availability and predictability of complementary pathways, as envisaged in the GCR. UNHCR took steps to strengthen its operational capacity by issuing guidance in relation to: (i) planning and reporting on complementary pathways; (ii) introducing dedicated staff positions; and (iii) enhancing synergies across diverse professional disciplines and structures within the organization to improve outcomes. Furthermore, structural reforms in regional bureaux and several divisions contributed to advancing complementary pathways, particularly through the appointment of focal points for solutions, including complementary pathways. UNHCR and partners launched a pilot project to expand access to family reunification for vulnerable unaccompanied children in the central Mediterranean region, with support from experts who were deployed in Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya and Sudan. As a result, a total of 600 children received assistance; 129 best interest determinations were conducted; and 129 children were referred for legal assistance.

15. UNHCR strengthened and expanded cooperation with partners working on complementary pathways for admission. The Office, together with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the World University Service of Canada, convened a conference in November 2019 on educational opportunities as complementary pathways. It constituted a step towards engaging relevant actors in a task force committed to the expansion of educational opportunities as complementary pathways to admission in third countries. UNHCR also strengthened partnerships with Talent Beyond Boundaries, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United World Colleges and the OECD.

IV. Building the foundation

16. The strategy recognizes public support as an essential element for refugee access to resettlement and complementary pathways. One of the core objectives of the CRISP is to support States to build sustainable programmes that include planning for reception and integration of resettled refugees. An update to UNHCR’s 2002 international handbook on refugee resettlement is under preparation and a new integration training programme will be piloted for government officials and key stakeholders in the Americas in the second half of 2020.

17. UNHCR remains committed to the partnership with the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative (GRSI). Six States (Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand and Spain) used the opportunity of the GRF to reaffirm their commitment to community-based sponsorship, launching the GRSI States’ network to promote this approach with other States and facilitate technical and policy exchanges in relation to its application. Community-based sponsorship has the potential to increase access to solutions for refugees, while fostering sustainable integration and expanding global and local support for refugees and their protection.

V. Conclusion

18. Seventy years ago, the United Nations General Assembly mandated UNHCR with the task “of seeking permanent solutions for the problem of refugees.” Since then, millions of refugees from around the world have found protection through resettlement. UNHCR will build on the momentum generated through the GRF and the ATCR to advance the strategy towards achieving its goals: more refugees resettled; more refugees with access to complementary pathways; improved quality of reception and integration programmes; and greater public and political support for third-country solutions as concrete contributions towards enhancing global solidarity with refugees and host countries.