

**Briefing for debate on 29 January 2014:  
The UK's participation in the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
(UNHCR) Syrian Refugees Programme**

*"Syria has become the great tragedy of this century – a disgraceful humanitarian calamity with suffering and displacement unparalleled in recent history."*

António Guterres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on Syria, 3 September 2013

Amnesty International and the Refugee Council are urging MPs to please attend the debate in Parliament on Wednesday 29 January on the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Syrian Refugee Programme and vote in support of the UK's participation. It is essential the UK government;

- offers resettlement and/or humanitarian admission places to vulnerable Syrian refugees
- offers these places over and above the UK's usual annual quota of 750 resettlement places under the Gateway Protection Programme, to ensure that resettlement opportunities continue to be available to refugees from the rest of the world.

#### **The scale of the crisis**

Since the conflict started in Syria nearly three years ago more than 100,000 people have been killed and more than 2.3 million people have fled the country. More than half of Syria's refugees are children. The UNHCR predicts that the refugee population in the region could reach **over 4 million** by the end of 2014.<sup>i</sup>

As the number of Syrians desperately seeking safety continues to rise, 97% are being sheltered by a small number of countries neighbouring Syria. But these countries are struggling to cope: Lebanon alone is sheltering almost 900,000 refugees from the Syrian conflict, increasing the country's population by 19%.

In Jordan the number of refugees from Syria has increased from 1,000 in September 2011 to 90,000 in September 2012 to over 500,000 in September 2013.<sup>ii</sup> On Radio 4's Today programme on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 2013, Prince Hassan of Jordan was asked if the people of Jordan were running out of patience with Syrian refugees. He responded: "We are running out of water".

With thousands crossing Syria's borders everyday, international solidarity is becoming all the more crucial. One of the main ways the UK can show solidarity with countries hosting large numbers of Syrian refugees, while providing urgent protection for the most vulnerable people, is to offer resettlement and humanitarian admission places. The UN refugee agency (UNHCR) has set a global goal of securing 30,000 such places outside of the region by the end of this year.

Only a global resettlement programme will offer a durable solution to the most vulnerable, including **women at risk, torture survivors, refugees with medical needs or disabilities; children and adolescents at risk and vulnerable older adults** who will struggle to survive in the harsh conditions in the region.

#### **The UK response**

The Prime Minister has called Syria the "refugee crisis of our time" and said that "Britain is not the sort of country that wants to stand by."<sup>iii</sup> The UK has committed £600 million in humanitarian aid for people inside Syria and in the region which has been warmly welcomed by Amnesty, the Refugee Council and other NGOs.

However, given the scale and the gravity of the tragedy unfolding across the region, aid alone is not enough. The UK has a proud tradition of protecting refugees. We must play our part in providing a safe haven to those who will struggle to survive in the region.

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### **The UK's response to previous conflicts**

The UK has responded to previous refugees crises by establishing the measures that we are calling for. During the Balkan crisis in the 1990s, we accepted thousands of Kosovan and Bosnian refugees into the UK for an initial fixed period.

The UK already operates a resettlement programme and currently accepts 750 UNHCR recognised refugees every year through the Gateway Protection Programme from other protracted refugee situations. UNHCR is calling on states to offer places for Syrian refugees *in addition* to their current resettlement quotas to ensure that resettlement opportunities also continue to be available for refugees from the rest of the world. **It is vital that the UK offers these places over and above this usual annual resettlement quota.**

### **How does the UNHCR programme work?**

The programmes are implemented in countries neighbouring Syria and in the wider region hosting the largest numbers of Syrian refugees who have fled the conflict, including Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, as well as other countries in the region and beyond as needed.

UNHCR is working closely with resettlement and humanitarian admission countries to prioritise the most vulnerable, including women and girls at risk, survivors of violence and/or torture, refugees with medical needs or disabilities, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex refugees at risk, vulnerable older adults, and refugees in need of family reunification. Refugees who face serious threats to their physical security, particularly due to political opinion or belonging to an ethnic or religious minority group, may also be prioritised.

### **Which countries participate in the resettlement and humanitarian admission programmes of Syrian refugees so far?**

To date, 18 countries have agreed to receive refugees on humanitarian admission or resettlement for 2013/2014, which include Australia (500 places), Austria (500), Canada (1,300), Finland (500), France (500), Germany (10,000), Norway (1,000), Sweden (400) and the United States of America (an open-ended number). The total pledges for admission now stands at 18,300 places plus an open-ended number to the United States of America.

### **Why we must join the UNHCR programme now**

Antonio Guterres, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on Syria has warned that: *"The tide of human suffering unleashed by the conflict has catastrophic implications. If the situation continues to deteriorate at this rate, the number of refugees will only grow, and some neighbouring countries could be brought to the point of collapse."*

There are extremely worrying reports of people trying to escape the fighting, including families with small children, being denied admission by neighbouring countries. According to an April 2013 survey, 71 per cent of Jordanians want the border with Syria to be closed to new arrivals.<sup>iv</sup>

If Syria's neighbours close their borders the implications will be catastrophic. Western countries have a moral imperative to show solidarity with Syria's neighbours by sharing the responsibility of protecting some of the most vulnerable fleeing Syria.

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<sup>i</sup> UNHCR, online at <http://www.unhcr.org/syriarrp6/>

<sup>ii</sup> Amnesty International, *Growing Restrictions, Tough Conditions*, 31 October 2013, online at <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/MDE16/003/2013/en>

<sup>iii</sup> At the 25th anniversary of the Holocaust Educational Trust

<sup>iv</sup> Amnesty International, *ibid*.

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