



Australian Refugee Rights Alliance

“No Compromise on Human Rights”

2009

NGOS AND RESETTLEMENT ADVOCACY

Comments Invited

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INTRODUCTION

The Global Consultations on International Protection, launched in late 2000, culminated in the “Agenda for protection” being endorsed by UNHCR’s Executive Committee and the UN General Assembly in 2002.

The "Agenda for protection" noted both the role of NGOs in assisting States and UNHCR to “maintain the integrity of the international refugee protection regime, notably through advocacy”, as well as reaffirming the importance of resettlement as one of the three core durable solutions.

This briefing paper outlines a number of ways in which NGOs around the world have worked with UNHCR to facilitate third country resettlement for refugees.

TRADITIONAL ADVOCACY FOR INDIVIDUAL CASES

Resettlement advocacy has traditionally taken the form of NGOs, and private sponsors, advocating for the protection of individuals or families who have been recognised as refugees by the UNHCR. For example in the 2008 financial year, the private sponsorship programs of Australia and Canada resulted in the resettlement of 5028¹ and 3116² refugees (and persons at risk) respectively.

In the US, designated NGO (along with the UNHCR and US embassies) are able to directly refer individuals of any nationality to the US government for consideration of refugee claims. Certain NGOs also play an important role in assisting the US State Department to identify specific groups with special characteristics in certain countries that are targeted for resettlement.³ In the 2008 financial year the US resettled 60,108 refugees.⁴

IMPLEMENTING PARTNER WITH UNHCR

Another form of advocacy is for NGOs to work directly with the UNHCR to implement various programs that improve the resettlement process.

An example of this is the work of the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC) who is engaged in resettlement selection through its Resettlement Deployment Scheme, established in 1997. This UNHCR-ICMC project allows resettlement professionals from the private sector, the government and NGOs to experience first hand UNHCR policies and procedures. The scheme has strengthened the ties between the UNHCR and participating resettlement organisations and been successful at increasing global resettlement referrals.

ADVOCATING FOR COUNTRY PROGRAMMES

NGOs have worked to encourage governments to implement a resettlement programme or improve their existing resettlement activities. This work is extremely important in ensuring that resettlement programmes evolve to fit changing global and domestic situations. An example of this form of advocacy is that performed by The European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE). ECRE has consistently called on EU member states to enhance their resettlement programmes.⁵

The Refugee Council of the United States of America (RCUSA), a coalition of US NGOs focused on refugee protection, has also taken action to encourage the US government to increase its funding for the resettlement program in order to be able to raise the number of refugees offered protection. An example of RCUSA's advocacy work is their March 2009 letter to President Obama, which stated:

To ensure that the Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR) can adequately serve refugees and other vulnerable groups a substantial increase funding is required.⁶

ADVOCATING FOR THE RESETTLEMENT OF SPECIFIC GROUPS

Increasingly, human rights NGOs working on refugee issues, have highlighted the need to resettle specific groups of refugees. Using targeted advocacy, NGOs are often able to convince resettlement governments to focus their efforts on specific refugee groups at particular risk or previously ignored. Furthermore, resettling a significant portion of a specific group, gives the UNHCR a higher chance of successfully implementing the other durable solutions of return or integration for the remaining population.

Examples of specific group advocacy include:

Iraqis: As the number of Iraqis forced to flee violence, as a result of the 2003 invasion, continued to increase and with resettlement states initially slow to respond, NGOs petitioned governments to increase the number of Iraqis that they resettled. For example:

- Human Rights Watch in 2007 recommended that the US Government *share the responsibility of protecting refugees fleeing the war in Iraq. The administration should significantly increase the number of Iraqi refugees it will resettle this year and contribute quickly and generously to the UN refugee agency's appeal for financial assistance.*⁷
- In 2009, Human Rights First released a report that recommended the US government *lead an international effort to resettle—within two years—the 85,000 Iraqi refugees whom the UNHCR has identified as extremely vulnerable.*⁸
- Amnesty International released a report in 2008 that called for *a real and sustained effort to resettle vulnerable refugees, such as those with serious medical conditions, to countries where they will receive adequate care.*⁹
- In 2008, the Canadian Council for Refugees petitioned the Canadian government to accept more Iraqis for resettlement and increase funding to the millions of Iraqis stuck in Jordan and Syria.¹⁰

As little as 1000 Iraqi refugees were resettled to the USA between 2003 and 2006. However, the US welcomed more than 13,000 Iraqis in 2008¹¹ and plans to resettle at least 17,000 in the current fiscal year.¹² The Australian government agreed to resettle an additional 500 Iraqis (on top of the general resettlement program) in 2008.¹³ While in February 2009, it was announced that Canada will more than double the number of privately sponsored Iraqi refugees it accepts from the Middle East.¹⁴

Rohingya: Denied citizenship and persecuted by the Burmese authorities, and generally often mistreated in the neighbouring countries to which they have fled, the Rohingya have few options but to be resettled.

- In 2008 Refugees International asked that governments recognise the Rohingya of Burma as a stateless population with little or no chance of integrating into the neighbouring countries, and as such acknowledge that resettlement is the only option.¹⁵
- Human Rights Watch released a report in 2009 denouncing the Burmese authorities' treatment of the Rohingya and asking neighbouring countries as well as resettlement countries to better protect the Rohingya.¹⁶

In late 2006 Canada became the first country to offer resettlement to Rohingya refugees who had been trapped in two camps in Bangladesh for over 15 years, initially offering to resettle 23 individuals. In February 2007 a joint NGO-UNHCR mission went to the camps to help UNHCR develop the "Heightened risk identification tool".¹⁷ The findings of this visit were presented at the 2007 ATCR and helped UNHCR raise the profile of the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh. As a result, in 2008 eight resettlement countries came forward to resettle a further 500 individuals from the camps.

JOINT ADVOCACY WORK, RECENT MISSION FOR PALESTINIAN REFUGEES FROM IRAQ

Following a number of reports from human rights NGOs, highlighting the plight of Palestinian refugees from Iraq, in November 2008, a delegation of thirteen NGOs from eight countries visited the three camps on the Iraq/Syria border. The visit was coordinated by Refugee Council USA and facilitated by UNHCR. The participating NGOs produced a joint statement that urged resettlement countries to accept all 3000 refugees and close down the camps. The statement argued that:

The refusal of neighbouring countries to grant them asylum, their lack of legal status, the high degree of trauma suffered by Palestinian refugees, and the poor conditions in the camps all argue for third country resettlement as the best near-term solution for the camp population.¹⁸

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Demonstrating international solidarity has played an important role in raising awareness about the desperate plight of the refugees in these camps and convincing governments to accept resettlement referrals from UNHCR. This model provides an example for future NGO delegations to further work with UNHCR on behalf of vulnerable populations. As noted in the "Agenda for protection" NGOs have an important role in maintaining the integrity of the international protection regime through advocacy. It is vital that NGOs continue to play an effective role in advocacy around resettlement and look for new and creative ways to ensure that those individuals and groups most in need of protection are not forgotten or ignored.

This year, with ATCR and the UNHCR NGO Consultations overlapping there is a unique opportunity for NGOs working in countries of first asylum and those from resettlement countries to meet and talk about ways they can work together to highlight vulnerable refugee populations in need of resettlement. With UNHCR staff from Regional Bureaus and the Resettlement Service attending these Consultations further initiatives can be developed. Also, with State representatives from resettlement countries attending, opportunities exist to build relationships and develop understandings of specific country programs and priorities, vital to facilitating informed discussion when developing advocacy strategies for forgotten groups.

ABOUT ARRA

ARRA: Australian Refugee Rights Alliance is a consortium of Australian Non Government Organisations who attend the UNHCR Annual Consultations for NGOs and Executive Committee annually to continue their advocacy for change at the international level.

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