



**Refugee Communities Advocacy Network (RCAN)  
Submission to the Department of Home Affairs'  
Humanitarian Program 2021-22 consultation**

**27 May 2021**

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## 1. Introduction

Refugee Communities Advocacy Network (RCAN) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to Australia's Humanitarian Program 2021-22 consultations. RCAN is led and driven by refugees, former refugees, people seeking asylum and people with refugee lived experiences. RCAN represents and advocates on behalf of refugee communities in NSW.

## 2. Summary of recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** The Australian Government continues working closely with the UNHCR to identify refugee populations most in need of resettlement.

**Recommendation 2:** Australian Government provides resources to build the capacity of immigration officers to address LGBTIQ+ resettlement needs better.

- Immigration staff (including interpreters) must be trained to understand LGBTIQ+ asylum challenges and sensitise them to the nature of LGBTIQ+ persecution based on their sexuality or gender, which could be an additional vulnerability factor in an existing conflict situation,
- Ensure LGBTIQ+ people are safe when applying for refugee status based on their sexuality or gender. This takes a different form in different countries and situations,
- Ensure there are places in the Australian humanitarian program for different LGBTIQ+ country cohorts,
- ensure appropriate services are available on resettlement to support LGBTIQ+ humanitarian entrants.

**Recommendation 3:** Australia's humanitarian program for 2021-22 is made up as follows -

- Increasing the African refugee intake on the 2020 levels. Congolese and South Sudanese refugees are given priority,
- Creating dedicated places for LGBTIQ+ refugees or for those who still live in their home countries such as Iran who experience persecution based on their gender identity,
- Resettling Rohingya refugees from Cox's Bazar refugee camps in Bangladesh,
- Giving people from Myanmar whose temporary visas have been recently extended due to the political crisis in Myanmar brought about by the military taking over the Government by force,
- Resettling refugees who were displaced due to recent events in Myanmar,
- Increasing the Afghan refugee intake, in particular the Hazar who might experience another wave of displacement due to the withdrawal of American and Australian forces from that country,
- Venezuelan refugees should make up part of this intake,
- Refugees who live in Kenyan refugee camps who can't repatriate and cannot be locally integrated, including those from Somalia, South Sudan and the Congo, be included in Australia's humanitarian intake for 2021-22.

**Recommendation 4:** Australian Humanitarian program cut be reinstated to 18,750 as soon as practical and gradually increased to 20,000 by 2025.

**Recommendation 5:** The CSR be restructured so that the costs, particularly those related to visa fees and welfare, be dropped significantly to enable refugee communities to participate in CSR. The Australian Government could wave the visa fees for refugee Community organisations participating in the CSR. Also, as in the Canadian case, in-kind support such as accommodation reduces the welfare cost. In the Canadian model, refugees coming through the PSR can access health care and education opportunities without the sponsor incurring any extra fees.

**Recommendation 6:** The Australian Government expands the SRSS program so that people seeking asylum, especially those who have arrived on boats many years ago, have access to income support. A support program akin to the Specialised and Intensive Services (SIS) available to humanitarian entrants with multiple complex needs be established for asylum seekers to address their complex needs and trauma inflicted on them by the Australian Immigration system as they wait for their claims to be finalised.

**Recommendation 7:** The Australian Government continue to work with organisations like GLAPD to plan regional settlement. Former refugees who have settled in the city can be encouraged to move to regions identified as settlement regions to start communities and community infrastructure to ensure that future humanitarian entrants sent to these regions can access community and settlement infrastructure.

### 3. International context

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports that of the 1.4 million refugees who needed resettlement in 2019, only 4.5% was resettled<sup>1</sup>. The UNHCR argues that the demand for more resettlement places is urgent:

In the current global context, with ongoing [conflicts] preventing refugees from safely returning home, overburdened asylum systems that limit possibilities of local integration, and the emergence of a global pandemic further impacting the precarious situation of many refugees, the need for increased resettlement opportunities is more urgent than ever. <sup>2</sup>

The UNHCR projects that the global need for resettlement will increase from 1,440,408 persons in 2020 to 1,445,383 persons in 2021. The UNHCR identifies the African region as the one with the highest projected resettlement need for 2021, with 617,000 persons in need of protection<sup>3</sup>.

Refugees from Syria dominate the global need for resettlement, with 592,000 individuals needing resettlement. Syrian refugees make up 40% of global

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, UNHCR Projected Global Resettlement Needs 2021, UNHCR, 10, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/5ef34bfb7.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, 11.

resettlement need for 2021. Refugees from the Democratic Republic of the Congo and South Sudan make the second and third largest refugee groups in need of resettlement in 2021, each producing 9% of the total global resettlement needs. That is followed by refugees from Afghanistan (6%) and Sudan (6%), making the top 5 refugee populations in most need of resettlement for 2021.

By 2021, it is projected that the number of refugees from Venezuela will increase by 489% on the 2020 number. The current number of refugees from the Americas who need resettlement is 29,374. Venezuelan refugees in need of resettlement make up 70%. In the Middle East region, refugees from Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan and Sudan make the top refugee groups in need of resettlement.

There are other refugee situations that the RCAN is keen to highlight. The situation in Myanmar continues to evolve, in particular after the military took over. The popular uprising in Myanmar challenged the military take over. The military responded by killing protesters and bombing rural areas, traditionally the source of resistance to the central Government. Many people were displaced as a consequence. Those who crossed borders will need to be resettled as it is not likely that they have the option of returning home or achieving local integration in their countries of first asylum.

The Rohingya refugee crisis instigated by the Burmese military when they attacked Rohingya villages in 2019 has not been resolved. About a million Rohingya continue to live in Bangladesh refugee camps in the Cox's Bazar region. Rohingya refugees are unable to go back to Myanmar, and local integration is unlikely to happen. Therefore, the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh have significant resettlement needs that are not currently being met.

The conflict in Afghanistan is only likely to escalate with the withdrawal of American and other foreign forces, including Australians. The recent bombing of a school is a sign of things to come. It is likely that the withdrawal of foreign forces from Afghanistan will only increase violence. More refugees will be produced, particularly among ethnic groups such as the Hazara, throughout 2021 and beyond. The resettlement needs of Afghani refugees will only increase.

In Iraq, Yazidi families continue to experience the brutality of ISIS. Members of the Yazidi community in Australia have been reporting continuous abduction of their families. Some family members have been found, but many more are still missing. The family reunion needs of Yazidi families continue to grow.

The Kenyan Government recent announcement to close refugee camps is concerning. The Kenyan Government plans for the repatriation and local integration of over 400,000 refugees who currently live in Dadaab and Kakuma Refugee Camps. Refugees in both camps come mainly from Somalia and South Sudan but also Ethiopia, Uganda, the DRC, Rwanda and Burundi. Repatriation is not an option for South Sudanese, Somalis and Congolese due to conflict in the home countries. The capacity of Kenya to provide local integration is questionable in a country where poverty is rife. The Kenyan economy continues to struggle to offer many Kenyans livelihood opportunities. The violent clashes that erupt during national elections are a clear sign that the Kenyan population struggles to make ends meet. Therefore, the

closure of refugee camps in Kenya by mid-2022 heighten the need for resettlement for refugees in Kenyan refugee camps over 2021/22.

Finally, there are concerns about LGBTIQ+ refugees. RCAN members have reported that members of the LGBTIQ+ in refugee camps struggle to have their claims considered for protection and therefore live in precarious condition in countries of first asylum. Members of the LGBTIQ+ refugee community in Turkey (but also elsewhere) are physically punished, sexually abused, and financially exploited. They often live in squalor conditions with little or no hope at all for receiving protection. The situation is no different for those in African refugee camps. LGBTIQ+ refugees' needs for resettlement are significant as they find themselves unable to return home or secure decent protection in countries of first asylum.

RCAN members are also concerned that members of the LGBTIQ+ in many countries are being persecuted by authorities and suppressed based on their sexual/gender identity. The United Nations has concerns for the LGBTIQ+ community in Iran<sup>4</sup>. This suggests that LGBTIQ+ within countries of origin may have significant resettlement needs as their only recourse is political asylum<sup>5</sup>.

**Recommendation 1:** The Australian Government continues working closely with the UNHCR to identify refugee populations most in need of resettlement.

**Recommendation 2:** Australian Government provides resources to build the capacity of immigration officers to address LGBTIQ+ resettlement needs better.

- Immigration staff (including interpreters) must be trained to understand LGBTIQ+ asylum challenges and sensitise them to the nature of LGBTIQ+ persecution based on their sexuality or gender, which could be an additional vulnerability factor in an existing conflict situation,
- Ensure LGBTIQ+ people are safe when applying for refugee status based on their sexuality or gender. This takes a different form in different countries and situations,
- Ensure there are places in the Australian humanitarian program for different LGBTIQ+ country cohorts,
- ensure appropriate services are available on resettlement to support LGBTIQ+ humanitarian entrants.

#### 4. Australia's role as a resettlement country

Since World War II or even earlier, Australia has been settling refugees. Australia's refugee program has protected nearly a million refugees since the 1940s. Unlike other migrant cohorts who come to Australia, refugees settle permanently. They are also more likely to establish businesses of their own compared to the general population<sup>6</sup>. Children of refugees who settle in Australia perform much better than

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<sup>4</sup> <https://undocs.org/en/A/hrc/46/50>.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.dw.com/en/the-difficulties-of-being-gay-in-iran/a-56717484>.

<sup>6</sup> Hugo, G. 2013. The Economic Contribution of Humanitarian Settlers in Australia. *International Migration*. [https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/sites/kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/files/the\\_economic\\_contribution\\_of\\_humanitarian\\_settlers\\_in\\_australia.pdf](https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/sites/kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/files/the_economic_contribution_of_humanitarian_settlers_in_australia.pdf). Also Refugee Council of Australia. 2010. Economic, Civic and Social Contribution of Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants – Literature Review. Department of Immigration and

the general population in the employment market<sup>7</sup>. Refugees have also contributed significantly to the social and cultural development of Australia. Refugees bring diverse cultures, languages, and religions to improve and strengthen the Australian social fabric. Refugees also understand loss, grief, injustice and social justice. As a result, they bring resilience and humility, characteristics that many Australia would learn much from in a Global Pandemic.

Australia's role as a refugee resettlement destination is growing in importance as the need for resettlement, as discussed in section 1 above, is expanding globally. RCAN agrees with the Shergold Review<sup>8</sup> that the Australian humanitarian program should continue selecting refugees based on their humanitarian needs. That means that Australia should select refugees based on their vulnerability so that the most vulnerable are given priority. Australia is well placed to continue addressing the challenges that come with refugee vulnerability in the course of resettlement.

**Recommendation 3:** Australia's humanitarian program for 2021-22 is made up as follows -

- Increasing the African refugee intake on the 2020 levels. Congolese and South Sudanese refugees are given priority,
- Creating dedicated places for LGBTIQ+ refugees or for those who still live in their home counties such as Iran who experience persecution based on their gender identity,
- Resettling Rohingya refugees from Cox's Bazar refugee camps in Bangladesh,
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- Venezuelan refugees should make up part of this intake,
- Refugees who live in Kenyan refugee camps who can't repatriate and cannot be locally integrated, including those from Somalia, South Sudan and the Congo, be included in Australia's humanitarian intake for 2021-22.

## 5. Size of the humanitarian program

The Australian humanitarian program size should be determined by global resettlement needs and Australia's capacity to settle refugees successfully. Unfortunately, Australia's humanitarian program has been reduced from 18,750

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Citizenship. [https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settlement-services-subsite/files/economic-civic-social-contributions-refugees-humanitarian-entrants-literature-review\\_access.pdf](https://immi.homeaffairs.gov.au/settlement-services-subsite/files/economic-civic-social-contributions-refugees-humanitarian-entrants-literature-review_access.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Shergold P (Chair), Kerrin Benson and Margaret Piper. 2019. Review of Investing in Refugees, Investing in Australia – The Findings for a Review into the Integration, Employment and Settlement Outcomes of Refugees Humanitarian Entrants in Australia. Department of Home Affairs. <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/reports-and-pubs/files/review-integration-employment-settlement-outcomes-refugees-humanitarian-entrants.pdf>

places to pre-2017 levels of 13,750<sup>9</sup>. The reduction of the humanitarian program size has been factored into the budget as a permanent cut. It will save the budget about a billion dollars over the forward estimate<sup>10</sup>.

The permanent reduction in the size of the Australian humanitarian program does not make sense given that the global resettlement needs, as discussed in section 3, continue to increase. That also goes against the Australian Government's commitment to a leaders' summit in New York in 2016. Australia committed to raise its humanitarian program annual intake to 18,750 places permanently<sup>11</sup>. Although Australia was not able to meet its commitment to settle 18,750 for the financial years 2019/2020 and 2020/21 due to COVID-19, it will be difficult for the Australian Government to justify the reduction to the annual humanitarian intake beyond that (assuming that the COVID pandemic will be under control by mid-2022).

As discussed in section 1, the UNHCR points out that COVID-19 contributes to increasing global resettlement need. COVID-19 increase vulnerability among refugees as their health status is not generally good. COVID-19 pandemic can indirectly shift the focus away from pre-pandemic refugee crisis or currently unfolding crisis such as Myanmar and Afghanistan.

RCAN and its members struggle to understand why the Australian Government cannot keep a commitment to the international community to increase its humanitarian program to 18,750 permanently. RCAN appreciates the challenges border closures can impose for Australia to fill its humanitarian program as pledged in 2016. However, to have this reduction included in the budget forward estimates and locking it in is difficult to understand. The budget repair in Australia should not rely on taking away a billion dollars from vulnerable refugees. The Australian Government has just taken out a billion dollars it pledged to the international community to increase global resettlement.

The cuts to the humanitarian program also do not make sense when Australia successfully settled about 22,000 humanitarian entrants in 2016/17, more than 16,000 in 2017/18 and 18,700 in 2018/19. RCAN believes that Australia can take 30,000 humanitarian entrants annually and resettle them effectively. Australia's humanitarian program is superior to the German one, but Germany took a million refugees in 2015/16 and resettlement them successfully<sup>12</sup>. Australia can do better and increase its annual humanitarian entrant intake.

**Recommendation 4:** Australian Humanitarian program cut be reinstated to 18,750 as soon as practical and gradually increased to 20,000 by 2025.

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<sup>9</sup> Love, S. and Harriet Spinks. Immigration – Budget Review 2020-21 index. Parliamentary Library. [https://www.aph.gov.au/About\\_Parliament/Parliamentary\\_Departments/Parliamentary\\_Library/pubs/rp/BudgetReview202021/Immigration](https://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/BudgetReview202021/Immigration).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Keita, S. and Helen Dempster. 2020. Five Years Later, One Million Refugees are Thriving in Germany. Centre for Global Development. <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/five-years-later-one-million-refugees-are-thriving-germany>.

## 6. Community Support Program

Refugee Communities are interested in the Community Support Program (CSR). The CSR allows community organisations and individuals to sponsor refugees to come to Australia. The CSR is modelled on Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees (PSR). The PSR started in the 1970s and has so far enabled more than 280,000 refugees to resettle in Canada<sup>13</sup>. Settlement outcomes for sponsored refugees through the PSR are better at least in the first ten years compared to refugees coming to Canada through the Government managed program<sup>14</sup>.

The Kaldor Centre for International Refugee Law based at UNSW points out that CSR in its current form is out of reach for many Australian community organisations and individuals. The Kaldor Centre reports that visa fees alone cost \$19,000<sup>15</sup>. For the first 12 months, sponsors must cover welfare, health, and other associated costs concerning the sponsored refugee.

Refugee Communities in Australia, although keen to sponsor refugees, find the cost-prohibitive. CSR could potentially address the family reunion needs of the refugee community in Australia. Each year, recently arrived refugees and those who have been in Australia longer raise the lack of family reunion pathways for them as a significant challenge.

**Recommendation 5:** The CSR be restructured so that the costs, particularly those related to visa fees and welfare, be dropped significantly to enable refugee communities to participate in CSR. The Australian Government could wave the visa fees for refugee Community organisations participating in the CSR. Also, as in the Canadian case, in-kind support such as accommodation reduces the welfare cost. In the Canadian model, refugees coming through the PSR can access health care and education opportunities without the sponsor incurring any extra fees.

In addition, the CSR should be based on the principle of additionality so that the arrival of refugees through this program does not take away from the places allocated in the main humanitarian program.

## 7. Onshore component of the Humanitarian Program,

Australia's reputation has been damaged by its brutal treatment of asylum seekers who arrive on boats. Asylum seekers who arrive on boats break no laws by entering Australia unannounced to seek protection. People seeking asylum who have come to Australia on boats continue to live in the community. They have been waiting for many years for their status to be resolved. They are more vulnerable than other refugees who come to Australia through the offshore humanitarian program (they receive support to settle on arrival). In many cases, those who have come through the offshore humanitarian program come from the same refugee situations as their

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/canada-private-sponsorship/>

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.kaldorcentre.unsw.edu.au/publication/alternative-refugee-pathways-private-and-community-led-refugee-sponsorship>.

boat asylum seekers counterpart. Even worse, many people who arrived on boats are placed in immigration detention centres in neighbouring countries like Nauru.

In recent years, the Australian Government has made it significantly difficult for people seeking asylum who arrived by boat to access support. Eligibility criteria for the Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS) have been progressively tightened. A significant proportion of people seeking asylum who received welfare and income support through the SRSS program were forced out. Although those asylum seekers can work, it is challenging for them to find work as employers are reluctant to employ them. Those lucky to find work before the COVID pandemic could not hold on to jobs because their visas were often not renewed before they expire. At the height of the COVID pandemic in 2020, many people seeking asylum awaiting their status to be determined lost employment. More recently, people seeking asylum who were transferred to Australia for medical reasons from offshore detention centres have been let into the community without support. Many of such people have been living in detention centres for many years. Their trauma has been compounded over the years. Their release into the community is positive, but they need to be provided with health and welfare services as they wait for their status to be resolved.

**Recommendation 6:** The Australian Government expands the SRSS program so that people seeking asylum, especially those who have arrived on boats many years ago, have access to income support. A support program akin to the Specialised and Intensive Services (SIS) available to humanitarian entrants with multiple complex needs be established for asylum seekers to address their complex needs and trauma inflicted on them by the Australian Immigration system as they wait for their claims to be finalised.

## 8. Regional Settlement

The Australian Government has been encouraging migrants to settle in regional and rural parts of Australia. Many humanitarian entrants who settled in capital cities had rural backgrounds and struggled to adjust to life in the city. The Great Lakes Agency for Peace and Development (LAPD) has been assisting the Australian Government in developing a regional refugee settlement program after they successfully piloted regional settlement with Congolese humanitarian entrants.

Regional settlement can provide a positive alternative to settling humanitarian entrants in the city. However, this needs to be planned well. Regional and rural parts of Australia lack the necessary settlement infrastructure to enable humanitarian entrants to settle successfully. Settlement support services are well established in capital cities. Many capital cities have built refugee populations over time and have developed community infrastructure supporting later humanitarian entrant arrivals. Such infrastructure includes places of worship, community centres, community halls, shops that offer culturally specific commodities not found elsewhere and vibrant community life. Such infrastructure is missing in regional and rural areas of Australia. Humanitarian entrants settled in many regional and rural areas moved to the city to be with their community members or access specialised services not available in regional and rural parts of Australia.

There are several success stories where humanitarian entrants settle well in regional areas<sup>16</sup>. Success stories about humanitarian entrant regional settlement tend to attract more humanitarian entrants to regional areas. So, humanitarian entrant regional settle can be done successfully if well planned.

**Recommendation 7:** The Australian Government continue to work with organisations like GLAPD to plan regional settlement. Former refugees who have settled in the city can be encouraged to move to regions identified as settlement regions to start communities and community infrastructure to ensure that future humanitarian entrants sent to these regions can access community and settlement infrastructure.

## 9. Conclusion

Although the global resettlement needs continue to increase, only a significantly small proportion gets offered resettlement. The cuts to Australia's resettlement places is a blow to the global resettlement program. RCAN calls on the Australian Government to reinstate the cuts and progressively increase the annual resettlement places to 20,000 by 2025. In addition, RCAN calls on the Australian Government to increase resettlement places for:

- African refugees, particularly Congolese and South Sudanese refugees,
- refugees in Kenyan camps due to camps' imminent by mid-2022,
- Rohingya in Bangladesh,
- LGBTIQ+ refugees and those experiencing persecution in their own home countries and increase the number of resettlement places for Afghan and Burmese refugees.

RCAN highlights the situation of people seeking asylum who have arrived on boats a couple of years ago and are still waiting for their claims for protection to be finalised. RCAN calls on the Australian Government to ensure that those asylum seekers have access to income support and support services to address their complex situation.

RCAN believes that Australia's humanitarian program can be used to contribute in significant ways to address global resettlement needs. Refugees make a substantial contribution to Australia, and many more places must be created in the humanitarian program to maximise the benefits that Australia is accruing from resettling refugees.

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<sup>16</sup> Piper, M. 2017, Refugee Settlement in Regional Areas: Evidence-based Good Practice. NSW Department of Premier and Cabinet.