



## **BRIEF | FACILITATING HUMANITARIAN ARRIVALS IN THE CONTEXT OF GLOBAL VACCINE INEQUITIES**

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From the start of the COVID-19 pandemic until the end of 2021, border restrictions have meant only a trickle of refugee and humanitarian visa holders have been allowed to enter Australia. With the progressive opening of Australia's borders, it is fundamental that consideration is given to facilitating the arrival of refugee and humanitarian visa holders – particularly those who are unable to meet vaccination requirements due to extenuating circumstances. The following outlines steps that State and Federal governments can take to facilitate refugee resettlement in the context of global vaccine inequities.

### **Background**

By 1 December 2021, over 11,000 refugees granted permanent visas through Australia's Humanitarian Program (visa sub-classes 200, 201, 202, 203, 204) were waiting to start their new lives in Australia – some for over two years. While the national plan technically allowed them to enter the country without requiring a travel exemption from 15 December, there are a number of barriers slowing or preventing the process. One of these is the requirement for international arrivals to prove they are fully vaccinated with a Therapeutic Goods Administration-approved COVID-19 vaccine.

While many refugee and humanitarian visa holders overseas have been fully vaccinated and are able to meet this requirement, there are others living in contexts where there is limited supply or access to vaccines, where refugees are excluded from national vaccination programs, or where vaccines used are not recognised by the Australian Government (see Table 1 for overview of vaccine availability in the top 15 countries where humanitarian visa holders are residing). Some refugees have been vaccinated but may not have sufficient proof of their vaccination status due to weak health infrastructure, lack of identity documents, or because of their non-citizen status where they are residing (see Oxfam's [A People's Vaccine for Refugees](#)).

As of February 2022, it is unclear how or whether international arrivals who hold valid visas but do not meet vaccination requirements will be able to enter Australia.

### **Implications of resettlement delays**

- Refugees living in desperate situations overseas are left in further uncertainty. Social, economic and political upheavals in many parts of the world exacerbated by the pandemic have increased the vulnerability of refugee populations and put further pressure on major refugee host countries.
- The situation for many humanitarian visa holders has deteriorated. Some have moved from being in vulnerable to now crisis situations as healthcare and social assistance in host countries come under increasing pressure and refugees in some countries are excluded from supports.
- It is estimated that around 70% of humanitarian visa holders overseas have family or links in Australia who are citizens or permanent residents. The onus is then

#### **Refugees in Lebanon**

In July 2021, [UNICEF reported](#) that 77 per cent of households in Lebanon do not have enough food or enough money to buy food. In Syrian refugee households, this figure is 99 per cent.

While 26% of the Lebanese population was fully vaccinated at the start of December, Oxfam reports that only 4.3% of Syrian refugees in the country have been vaccinated. Furthermore, Lebanon has only secured enough vaccines for less than half (46%) of its population.

There are over 1,000 refugees who have been granted permanent visas by Australia currently residing in Lebanon.

on Australian families who are struggling to support their loved ones living in difficult circumstances overseas.

- Refugee-focused services, including state government refugee health and education programs, have faced difficulty maintaining their skilled workforces and making plans to receive a future surge in arrivals due to a lack of clarity about when resettlement numbers might realistically increase.

### **Border regulations and humanitarian visa holders who do not meet vaccination requirements**

For humanitarian visa holders who are not fully vaccinated or who have received a non-TGA-approved vaccine, there is no clear process to apply for an exemption to enter Australia, with vaccination exemptions for travel purposes only applying to children under 12 and those with a documented medical contraindication to COVID-19 vaccines.<sup>1</sup>

If exemptions to enter Australia were granted, it is unclear whether government-managed quarantine facilities would be made available on arrival and whether there is capacity to meet potential demand. For example, the NSW and Victorian governments have had minimal quarantine requirements for fully vaccinated international arrivals since November 2021, but small caps have been placed on the number of unvaccinated arrivals allowed to enter these states. Program data suggests only returning overseas travellers and airline crew are being accommodated in these facilities, not visa holders arriving for the first time.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of global vaccine inequities, it is unrealistic to expect that all refugee and humanitarian visa holders who have been granted permanent visas to resettle in Australia will have the privilege of access to vaccinations to enable their travel. In a context in which refugee host countries such as Burundi, Malawi and Chad have secured vaccines for less than a third of their own populations, and Australia has secured enough supply to vaccinate its population nearly five times over, it seems particularly insensitive to require humanitarian visa holders who will become permanent residents of Australia on arrival to be vaccinated pre-arrival.

To facilitate timely refugee resettlement while maintaining important public health measures, there is a need for some flexibility in vaccination requirements to be enabled, and for humanitarian arrivals who are not able to meet these requirements to be able to access quarantine and vaccines on arrival.

### **Practical steps to facilitating all humanitarian arrivals**

In order to ensure that all who have been granted refugee and humanitarian visas are able to resettle in Australia, **a targeted initiative to facilitate the arrival of humanitarian visa holders who do not meet vaccination requirements is needed.**

This could be achieved by:

- Establishing a process whereby Humanitarian (Subclass XB) visa holders who are unable to access vaccinations are eligible to apply for an exemption to the international arrivals vaccination requirement;
- Allocating additional quarantine capacity for humanitarian visa holders in either state or Federally managed quarantine facilities; or
- Expanding home quarantine arrangements to humanitarian visa holders in partnership with services funded through the Humanitarian Settlement Program (HSP).

A targeted initiative supporting up to 200 humanitarian arrivals per week who do not meet vaccination requirements, for example, would make a significant contribution to facilitating the timely resettlement of refugees – many for whom being unvaccinated is not a choice, but a reflection of the reality of gross global vaccine inequities.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.health.gov.au/health-alerts/covid-19/international-travel/proof-of-vaccination>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.coronavirus.vic.gov.au/covid-19-accommodation-program-data>

**Table 1. Top 15 countries where Refugee and Humanitarian visa holders are currently residing by vaccination access**

Country of residence at time of grant	Total visa holders (as of Feb 2021)	Vaccines approved in country <sup>3</sup> (Those not approved by TGA in red)	% of population in this country fully vaccinated <sup>4</sup> (as of Dec 2021)	Vaccine supply secured by % of population <sup>5</sup> (as of Dec 2021)	Are refugees included in national vaccine roll-out?
Iraq	1,348	Pfizer, <b>Sputnik</b> , AstraZeneca, Sinopharm	11%	35%	Yes
Lebanon	1,035	Pfizer, <b>Sputnik</b> , AstraZeneca, Sinopharm	26%	46%	Yes
Jordan	867	Pfizer, <b>Sputnik</b> , AstraZeneca, Sinopharm	37%	63%	Yes
Kenya	445	Moderna, Pfizer, <b>Sputnik</b> , Janssen, AstraZeneca, Sinopharm	5%	56%	No (Some access through IOM, UNHCR)
Thailand	383	Moderna, Pfizer, Janssen, AstraZeneca, Sinopharm, Sinovac	60%	169%	No (Some access through pilot)
India	270	Moderna, <b>Sputnik</b> , AstraZeneca, Janssen, Covishield, Covaxin	33%	100%	No (Some access privately)
Sudan	235	Janssen, AstraZeneca	1%	42%	Unclear
Burundi	205	Sinopharm	0.1%	32%	Unclear
Chad	174	Sinopharm	0.4%	31%	Unclear
Turkey	161	Pfizer, <b>Sputnik</b> , Sinovac	60%	141%	Yes
Malaysia	159	Moderna, Pfizer, <b>CanSino</b> , Janssen, AstraZeneca, Sinopharm, Sinovac	78%	139%	Yes
United States of America	132	Pfizer, Moderna, Janssen	59%	248%	Yes
Pakistan	114	Moderna, Pfizer, <b>CanSino</b> , <b>Sputnik</b> , AstraZeneca, Sinopharm, Sinovac	23%	50%	Some (only registered refugees)
Malawi	107	Janssen, AstraZeneca	3%	30%	Yes
United Arab Emirates	105	Moderna, Pfizer, <b>Sputnik Light</b> , <b>Sputnik</b> , AstraZeneca, Sinopharm,	88%	98%	Yes

<sup>3</sup> Vaccines approved by country: <https://covid19.trackvaccines.org/country> Note: Approval does not mean that all vaccines are being used. For example, only Pfizer and AstraZeneca are being administered in Lebanon.

<sup>4</sup> Vaccination rates by country: <https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus/country/iraq#what-share-of-the-population-has-been-fully-vaccinated-against-covid-19>

<sup>5</sup> Vaccine supply tracker by country: <https://www.imf.org/en/Topics/imf-and-covid19/IMF-WHO-COVID-19-Vaccine-Supply-Tracker>