

Resettlement and complementary pathways in an emergency

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Key points

- Draft a business continuity plan and anticipate needs in discussion with key partners
- Plan to continue active resettlement processing throughout the emergency response
- Advocate with resettlement countries to continue case processing as a priority, with the required flexibility
- Communicate early and effectively with refugees on third-country options available to them
- Advocate with relevant countries to adapt and simplify national family reunification procedures during emergencies to ensure these pathways are effective and accessible to refugees
- Advocate for the creation of humanitarian pathways and sponsorship pathways based on identified needs and to support the emergency response

1. Overview

This entry considers two principal scenarios for resettlement: (1) Resettlement from the country of emergency where a programme already exists or is being considered as a protection response to the emergency, and (2) resettlement from a neighboring country hosting individuals forcibly displaced by the emergency. This entry also provides key considerations related to protection-based complementary pathways in an emergency context.

2. Relevance for emergency operations

Resettlement processing in an emergency can be severely impacted by unforeseen

challenges including airport and airspace closures, security restrictions and imposed curfews, power cuts, embassy closures and uncertainty about new or interim government counterparts, notably those providing exit visas. Resettlement processing can also be impacted internally within UNHCR, for example, by the evacuation of non-essential staff or the redirection of financial resources to support life-saving protection and assistance activities in the emergency response. However, continued resettlement processing can also amount to a life-saving activity in an emergency and should continue for as long as practicable in the evolving circumstances, applying alternative, remote and/or flexible processing modalities as necessitated by the emergency context. **Strategic resettlement from a neighbouring country** should also be considered as part of broader regional response, helping to preserve access to territory for refugees forcibly displaced by the emergency while achieving broader solutions goals.

Complementary pathways represent ways for refugees to travel to third countries, with specific safeguards built in that take account of their need for international protection. UNHCR should aim to maintain, restore and facilitate family unity in an emergency, ensure effective access to national family reunification procedures and encourage States to implement protection-based humanitarian responses, like humanitarian and sponsorship pathways, for specific populations at risk.

3. Main guidance

1. Key considerations for resettlement from the country of emergency

A key resettlement risk in an emergency is that refugees who had sought protection in the country of emergency (as a country of asylum) may have dramatically increased resettlement needs and may lose access to this solution because resettlement countries can no longer effectively conduct resettlement processing and/or selection missions. UNHCR should advocate and aim to preserve processing capacity to help expedite decisions and departures. Putting resettlement on hold or delaying processes can aggravate protection risks and create case processing challenges, with refugees being forced to move onwards to different countries or locations, losing contact with UNHCR. The following considerations can mitigate risks and promote business continuity during the emergency.

1.1 Planning and preparedness

Key resettlement risks can be mitigated by anticipating and planning for the many challenges to case processing that an emergency can present. The below considerations support preparedness and processing flexibility, and should be discussed and agreed with colleagues (e.g. Registration, Refugee Status Determination, Protection, Programme, etc.) and key partners (e.g. IOM, resettlement countries and government counterparts), as relevant:

- **Anticipate the additional infrastructure and logistical needs** necessary to support continued processing if public services become over-stretched or collapse. Specific arrangements may need to be funded (e.g., transportation and accommodation of refugees in the resettlement process).

Following the devastating earthquake in 2023 that affected over 1.75 million refugees, UNHCR

immediately began contacting registered refugees by phone, with the support of the Turkish authorities, to assess their protection needs and prioritize those most in need of resettlement. UNHCR contracted a bus company to transport refugees from their settlement to resettlement interviews, as public infrastructure had been destroyed. Airbnb provided UNHCR with a cash grant to provide temporary accommodation to refugees awaiting resettlement. Vouchers were used to book accommodation on behalf of refugees through the online platform, on which members listed their lodging to take part in the solidarity efforts. Resettlement countries played an important role in the earthquake response in agreeing to expedite resettlement; showing flexibility with selection criteria and ID document requirements; working overtime on selection missions to increase their intake; and providing hotel accommodation for refugees until departure. UNHCR requested resettlement countries to allow for immediate submission of cases after the earthquake, allowing resettlement to be used as an immediate protection response and durable solution for the most vulnerable.

- **Consider the protection and assistance implications of delayed resettlement** processing and departure arrangements (e.g. increased CBI, shelter, for the most vulnerable refugees).
- **Prioritize the transition to [digital file management](#)**, i.e. the comprehensive use of [PRIMES](#), SharePoint and eSAFE. Digital file management represents good practice in regular operational contexts but is especially important in emergencies where physical files can be lost, damaged, destroyed or inaccessible.
- **Ensure that integrity and protection safeguards adapted to processing in an emergency context are documented and incorporated** at each step of the case management process to minimize fraud, protect refugees, and maintain the overall credibility and effectiveness of resettlement activities.
- **Ensure colleagues who may be evacuated are equipped to continue resettlement case processing remotely** (e.g. access to laptops, connectivity, camera, etc.) and ensure adequate PRIMES user access is available to all involved in case management (e.g. UNHCR Bureau colleagues providing back-up support).
- **Emphasize the critical role of reception and registration in UNHCR offices in neighbouring countries** in identifying refugees who were/are under active resettlement processing in the country of emergency. Ensure communication and systems are in place to facilitate the continuation of case processing in the neighboring country (e.g. Focal points, Data Transfer Requests).
- **Identify resettlement countries best placed to adapt resettlement processing to the emergency context**, i.e. those with greater facility to operate and technically able and resourced (including through embassy partners) to apply flexible case processing approaches. Such countries can champion processing modalities adapted to the context and encourage other resettlement countries to support the emergency response through simplified, accelerated and/or remote processing and expedited departure formalities. Resettlement countries already implementing dossier/remote submissions may be encouraged to join the response as well as share good practices with other countries to expand dossier processing capacity.

Despite the volatile context in Niger following the coup in August 2023, one resettlement country was able to expedite the departures of refugees accepted for resettlement. It adapted its processing arrangements to reduce reliance on local arrangements. Notably, it temporarily waived biometric collection, while developing a local visa application centre through an approved visa agency in the capital city and issued travel documents through its consular services outside the country, which then delivered visas through an international courier service.

- **Identify if and when UNHCR should redirect Resettlement Cases from one resettlement country to another country.** The emergency situation may have shifted diplomatic lines in a way that hampers resettlement processing for some resettlement countries, while others are able to continue. Decisions to [withdraw](#) cases from one resettlement country and [resubmit](#) to another must be taken in a transparent way, in consultation with the refugees concerned, relevant stakeholders and resettlement countries. [Urgent and emergency](#) Resettlement Cases should be redirected to another resettlement country in a timely way.
- **Advocate with resettlement countries to accept an additional intake** of refugees for immediate submission and accelerated exit formalities (e.g. issuance of travel documents in the event of an embassy closure), allowing resettlement to be used as an immediate protection response. Consider the use of [Emergency Transit Facilities](#) to enable and/or accelerate departures.
- **Establish regular briefing and coordination meetings with all resettlement partners.** Ensure rapidly changing information is updated and exchanged to enable each partner to do what they can to support the emergency. UNHCR should stand ready to help resettlement partners simplify procedures, where possible.

1.2 Communication with refugees (please see entry [Accountability to affected people](#))

Another key risk relates to the provision - or non-provision - of information that generates distress, confusion and unrest. This can place refugees at risk of harm, including vulnerability to misinformation or resettlement scams, and can prompt dangerous onward movement. The importance of clear and relevant communication about resettlement cannot be overstated. Consider the below elements for ensuring good communication in the emergency response:

- **Telephone hotlines and/or digital platforms** should be established at the onset of an emergency, and continuously updated, so that refugees can:
 - Access general information about UNHCR services and its resettlement programme during the emergency and key points of contact for different queries.

- Access individualized resettlement counselling regarding continuity or delays in the processing of their own Resettlement Case.
- Easily share updated contact information. Individuals should also be asked if they have been displaced to a different country and be advised on how to contact UNHCR for continued case processing in the new country/new location.
- Report changes in situation, including births and deaths in the Resettlement Case as well as serious degradation in circumstances that warrant emergency or urgent resettlement processing.
- **Information must be clear, risk-assessed and sensitive to the needs of the refugees concerned.** UNHCR should communicate in a straightforward way about resettlement processing and prospects, explaining the roles and responsibilities of the different actors involved (e.g. departure procedures handled by a specific partner, post-acceptance procedures conducted by resettlement countries and their partners, etc.). It is recommended to identify a focal point to continually update communication channels and platforms keeping refugees informed about resettlement. UNHCR is accountable for ensuring that refugees are kept aware of the resettlement situation as it impacts them.

2. Key considerations for resettlement from a neighbouring country in support of the emergency response

- Individuals who were refugees in the country of emergency and **undergoing active resettlement** before being forcibly displaced to a neighbouring country should have access to continued case processing from the new country of asylum. UNHCR will need to liaise with the relevant authorities and ensure agreement to process (and depart from) the new country of asylum. Consider the use of [Emergency Transit Facilities](#) to enable and/or accelerate departures.
- Targeted resettlement may also be conducted, in line with SOPs, **for other highly vulnerable individuals** who are part of new movements in an emergency, notably those for whom there would be no integration prospects or chance of return. Consider the use of [Emergency Transit Facilities](#) to enable and/or accelerate departures.
- More broadly, resettlement may be **implemented strategically to support the emergency response** and achieve other solutions goals, for example, resolving pre-existing or protracted refugee situations in the neighbouring country, to stabilize the protection space and keep borders open for new arrivals. Equally, resettlement countries can demonstrate solidarity by accepting refugees with specific medical or other needs to ease pressures on local health systems, for example.

3. Enhancing access to humanitarian complementary pathways

Data collection

Advocating for and ensuring the availability of humanitarian complementary pathways requires targeted and well-organized data collection, ideally based on self-reporting and offline modalities. The specific data fields that help build the evidence base for advocacy with States and partners to establish complementary pathways that contribute to the emergency response include data on **family members abroad** and information about **specific needs** or **profiles at risk** in the population (e.g. human rights defenders, LGBTIQ+ people). In the post-emergency

phase, it is recommended to include **education, work** and **language** information in an expanded registration dataset, in order to further inform programming around skills-based complementary pathways (such as education and labour mobility).

Such data may be collected through:

- Refugee self-reporting through self-service kiosks, online modalities including social media, hotlines, and through partner organisations.
- Rapid needs assessments of the population.
- Where available, partner data (ideally which is interoperable with proGres).
- Profiling data from proGres (specific needs; age, gender or diversity factors; and other vulnerability factors particular to the situation).
- UNHCR's observations on the ground, including protection monitoring activities.

Key considerations on family reunification (FR)

- Preventing family separation must be a priority. UNHCR must support effective family tracing and reunification, including through child-friendly registration procedures, [information](#) and access to legal and administrative assistance through partner organizations. It is imperative that unaccompanied and separated children are carefully registered with UNHCR and referred to child protection interventions in accordance with their best interests.
- UNHCR should advocate to ensure that family reunification procedures remain accessible in emergencies, through existing coordination structures and platforms as well as bilateral negotiations. States should be supported and encouraged to adapt programmes in view of the urgency and the constraints of the emergency context, for example, allowing procedural waivers that help preserve family unity and expedite family reunification. Other relevant procedural flexibilities that UNHCR could encourage States to implement include: enhancing practical cooperation and partnerships between embassies, UNHCR and other stakeholders (States, NGOs and other international organizations), establishing or strengthening remote processing modalities, considering prioritized processing, designing humanitarian corridors/group programmes for individuals already in the FR process.
- If there are urgent security concerns for departing family members, or if the usual framework of support for family reunification is interrupted by the emergency situation, UNHCR may consider additional direct case interventions, as appropriate, according to capacity and a risk management approach.
- Quality data on family composition and relatives abroad population allows UNHCR to advocate more effectively with specific States and other partners on expediting family reunification for eligible persons affected by the emergency.

Key considerations on Humanitarian pathways

- Humanitarian pathways can be used in emergencies as solutions for particularly at-risk groups, and as a tool to facilitate family reunification.
- UNHCR encourages States to utilize humanitarian visas to facilitate refugee admissions through humanitarian pathways programmes.
- To ensure humanitarian complementary pathways are well utilized, UNHCR should gather

evidence about risk profiles and specific needs within the affected population to present to partners considering humanitarian pathways, including States, NGOs, civil society and faith-based groups. Drawing on existing relevant population data sources in the emergency, from coordination platforms and forums to self-service modalities, protection monitoring and PRIMES data, UNHCR can advocate in a targeted and informed way for humanitarian pathways that respond to identified needs.

Key considerations on Sponsorship pathways

- During emergencies, community support for refugees in third countries can be channelled into specific sponsorship programmes.
- Where possible, UNHCR can offer an advisory role to support States, NGOs, civil society and community groups (including diaspora) establishing sponsorship programmes based on the protection needs of the affected population, for example, utilizing population data and evidence from the emergency response.
- In emergencies, people with active sponsorship applications may be faced with procedural and access challenges to embassies. In this scenario, UNHCR encourages procedural flexibilities - such as remote processing modalities or cooperation between embassies allowing for the submission of applications and/or documents at partner embassies. As with family reunification, States can contribute to the emergency response by adopting alternative approaches that enable cases to be processed and refugees to depart as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Annexes

[UNHCR Starter pack Complementary Pathways and Family Reunification, 2023](#)

4. Links

[UNHCR Resettlement Handbook, 2023](#)

5. Main contacts

DIP/ Resettlement and Complementary Pathways Service mailbox: hqdiprcps@unhcr.org