

## Resettlement and humanitarian admission of Syrian refugees to France: exchange of practices

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### Background

Held on June 18 2014 in the city of Lyon, the one-day meeting *'Resettlement and humanitarian admission of Syrian refugees to France: exchange of practices'* was held in the framework of the European Resettlement Network (ERN) and the SHARE Network. Co-organised and hosted by Forum Réfugiés and France Terre d'Asile, ERN National Focal Points and SHARE Network partners, the meeting was attended by 25 participants drawn from international organisations, the national government, civil society organisations and municipalities involved in receiving resettled refugees.

### Purpose of the meeting

In October 2013, the French President of the Republic committed to receive 500 Syrian refugees in the framework of an *ad hoc* resettlement and humanitarian admission programme. The Ministry of the Interior has set up a specific and innovative procedure for the selection and reception of these refugees, and groups began to arrive in January 2014.

In this context, the meeting aimed to develop exchanges of information and practices between all organisations (national institutions, municipalities and NGOs) involved in the reception of the refugees, and identify the main difficulties to be addressed. Participants also discussed ways to reinforce the French annual resettlement programme based on lessons learned from this 'experiment'.

This report summarises the interventions given by speakers and the meeting, and the subsequent questions and discussions amongst speakers and participants.

### Welcome and presentation of the European Resettlement Network (ERN)

**Mr. Jean-François Ploquin (Director-General of Forum réfugiés-Cosi)** welcomed the participants in the name of both organising partners and coordinators of the ERN/SHARE Networks. He reminded the relevance of the meeting in the framework of the Syrian crisis and pointed out the need to exchange experiences for stronger programmes.

**Mrs. Nadine Camp (Deputy Director for Advocacy and International development at Forum réfugiés-Cosi) and Mr. Matthieu Tardis (Head of the secretariat general at France terre d'asile)** introduced the ERN ([see presentation for further details](#)) and the aim of the meeting.

### UNHCR's role regarding the implementation of the resettlement and humanitarian admission programme for Syrian refugees

**Mr. Philippe Leclerc (UNHCR Representative to France)** provided current data on global resettlement needs and places. Around 90% of refugees live in developing countries or in countries close to warzones, and UNHCR estimates that around 700 000 refugees are in need of resettlement worldwide. Despite the growing number of resettlement countries, only around 80 000 resettlement places are available each year.

France established an annual resettlement programme in 2008, with a commitment to examine 100 cases<sup>1</sup> a year (outlined in an agreement between the French government and UNHCR).

Mr. Leclerc also reminded the audience of the situation in Syria, where the conflict has been running for three years and shows no sign of abating. Three million people have sought refuge in neighbouring countries, and many have attempted to cross the Mediterranean Sea and reach Europe. Since Bulgaria closed its border with Turkey, Sweden and Germany have received the highest number of asylum applications from Syrian refugees.

A first appeal for 10 000 resettlement or other admission places for Syrian refugees was launched by UNHCR in 2013. It was followed by a second appeal for 30 000 places for 2014-16. Germany has provided the largest number of places in response to these calls - the German government increased their initial offer from 10 000 to 20 000 places, and the sponsoring capacities of the German regions (*Länder*) have been increased to 5 500 places. As no end to the conflict, and hence no return of Syrian refugees, is foreseen in the near future, UNHCR recently launched an appeal for an additional 100 000 resettlement or other admission places for Syrian refugees for 2015-2016.

France has committed to receive 500 Syrian refugees under an *ad hoc* programme. Most of them are identified by UNHCR, but some also by NGOs and embassies in the field. Vulnerability is the main selection criterion (medical needs, protection needs, single women with children and so on – see UNHCR resettlement categories at [www.resettlement.eu](http://www.resettlement.eu) for full description). France has also established a “proximity” criterion covering people showing a specific link to France - be it commercial, cultural, familial or linguistic. However since the beginning of the programme France has become more flexible regarding the application of this criterion in response to the difficulties faced by UNHCR in fulfilling it. Vulnerability criteria are therefore prioritised.

Mr. Leclerc identified the strengths of the French programme to be the early identification of refugees by French Office for the Protection of Refugees and Stateless Persons (OFPRA) and the Ministry of Interior and the national coordination of the programme by a specific *Préfet* (government representative), both of which simplify and accelerate the resettlement procedure. Mr Leclerc also welcomed the protection status provided to Syrian refugees arriving into France, which is more favourable than in some other EU countries where most refugees benefit from Convention protection status, and entails a long-term residence status and access to all social rights.

### **OFPRA’s specific procedure for the admission of Syrian refugees**

According to **Mr. Mourad Derbak, Head of the Europe Division**, the main word to describe OFPRA’s action regarding the identification and reception of Syrian refugees is “innovation”. Two different French programmes are currently in place to receive Syrian refugees - resettlement and Humanitarian Admission, in which OFPRA has two quite distinct roles:

***Resettlement:*** within the permanent resettlement programme, OFPRA intervenes at the end of the procedure to interview refugees that have arrived in France and grant a legal residence status. Status is granted on average two months after an interview has taken place. Some changes have been made to the programme for Syrian arrivals to simplify the administrative burden and accelerate the procedure, in that OFPRA now assesses refugee claims using only the UNHCR dossier, rather than creating a new OFPRA file. OFPRA Protection Officers are sent to reception locations within ten days of refugees’ arrival to deliver

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Case’ in this context can refer a single refugee, or a family unit of refugees submitting an application to be resettled together

identity and protection documents. Refugee Status Determination (RSD) without an OFPRA file is possible only because UNHCR files for Syrian arrivals are relatively recent compared to the annual resettlement programme.

**Humanitarian Admission Programme for Syrians:** OFPRA's role is more prominent in this procedure, since it is one of the main actors (with the Ministry of the Interior) in the organisation and implementation of selection missions to countries of first asylum. During these missions, UNHCR submit dossiers to OFPRA Protection Officers and RSD is conducted in the field. There is no further examination of refugee claims once refugees get to France, and all information on refugees' profiles is gathered during the selection interviews in the country of first asylum.

Mr Derbak clarified the "proximity" criterion: it can happen that a dossier is re-oriented towards France from another country when interviews show that the person has a link with France. Additionally, persons having family in France who is ready to receive them can benefit from the visa programme.

### **'A mission at a glance'**

OFPRA and the Ministry of Interior initially set up an exploratory mission, with the aim of getting in touch with French and national authorities and international organisations (UNHCR and IOM) on the ground to introduce the French programme. This exploratory mission also provides an opportunity for the delegation to visit camps and discuss with stakeholders the selection criteria and the number of persons to be interviewed. OFPRA Protection Officers and some representatives of the Ministry then go on a full selection mission.

Two missions took place in Egypt and Lebanon: to date, 52 persons from Egypt have been resettled to Dordogne (South-Western France) and Nord-Isère (Eastern France), and 162 selected in Lebanon should arrive into France in the summer of 2014. Some mayors from the receiving municipalities participated in the missions in order to present their town and prepare both refugees and local populations for the arrival. A third mission should take place in September 2014.

**Discussion:** in response to a question on the possibility of conducting RSD without a separate OFPRA file within the regular resettlement programme, Mr. Derbak answered that this would be difficult since arrivals are spread over a longer time period and UNHCR dossiers are often 'old'. Besides, he stated that it is important to meet the refugees at some point in the selection process. UNHCR is discussing with the Ministry the possibility of applying some lessons learned from the Syrian resettlement and HAP programmes to the annual resettlement programme, including reserving a share of the annual resettlement quota for groups of refugees and organising selection missions.

### **Office Français de l'Immigration et de l'Intégration (OFII)'s role in the reception of resettled refugees**

**Mr. Ahmed Chtaibat (Head of the Asylum Unit at OFII)** recalled how **OFII** has been managing the reception of resettled refugees since 2008. Several options have been tested, including reception through the national reception scheme for asylum seekers (*Dispositif national d'accueil*) and the implementation of specific reception measures for resettled refugees. Mr. Chtaibat acknowledged that an evaluation of these two options was needed in order to compare their relative advantages and disadvantages

**Annual resettlement programme (dossier selection):** collecting and sharing of information is the main issue. On collecting information, the long lapse of time between selection and arrival makes it difficult to

have up-to-date, accurate information on the refugees, whose situation has often changed in the intervening period. Sharing information: contrary to group resettlement, IOM does not organise group pre-departure Cultural Orientation sessions on the resettlement country, but instead only distributes a leaflet about France. This information is not enough to correctly manage refugees' expectations. In addition, depending on where they are resettled in France, refugees do not benefit from the same reception scheme. Some operators offer direct access to housing, whilst others use the national asylum reception scheme for a few months, so a single generic leaflet does not adequately prepare refugees for their arrival.

**Resettlement & Humanitarian Admission programme for Syrian refugees:** the programme was designed so as not to impact on the national reception scheme, and thus provides direct access to housing. The national coordination by a *Préfet* has allowed the mobilisation of all stakeholders (schools, health care centres, social landlords, etc) and the active participation of local authorities in the process.

**Discussion:** according to participants, reception within the framework of the national asylum reception scheme is not the best solution. It creates stress for resettled refugees, the asylum seekers with whom they live and the service providers working with them.

### International Organization for Migration (IOM)'s role in the resettlement programmes

**Mrs. Sara Abbas (Director of IOM France)** explained that IOM is involved in resettlement activities before departure. After confirming with the refugees their wish to be resettled, the organisation is in charge of negotiating arrangements for exit and entry visas with authorities in the country of asylum, transportation from the country of first asylum to France's Roissy-Charles-de-Gaulle airport, and transfer from the airport to the final destination. A short pre-departure medical check-up determines if refugees are "fit to fly" or if there is a need for a medical escort. For groups of 15 people or more, IOM provides a one-day pre-departure Cultural Orientation session.

**Discussion:** participants asked about time between selection and arrival. For the Syrian refugees, it takes approximately one month to organise the journey from the point of selection. For refugees resettled in the framework of the annual programme, the time period is longer due to limited number of reception places and to some problems inherent to "individual" resettlement (as opposed to groups).

Questions also touched upon the medical check-up and sharing of information regarding refugees' health status. Mrs. Abbas reminded participants that an agreement between IOM and OFII states that all information on medical needs identified during the "fit-to-fly" check-up is passed on to OFII, which can decide if there is a need for a more advanced check-up. She also pointed out that data protection requirements for health make it difficult to give non-medical staff details on refugees' health status.

Finally, participants raised the question of the kind of information delivered to refugees before departure. Mrs. Abbas confirmed that IOM offices in the field do not know the final destination of refugees in France, and thus cannot give detailed information regarding the reception facilities and the integration programme they will benefit from. Mrs. Abbas also acknowledged that refugees departing/arriving individually receive less information than groups.

## The reception of Syrian refugees in practice: presentation of reception programmes implemented by NGOs

**Mrs. Sandrine Leseq (Head of the accommodation department)** presented the general framework of **ADOMA's** programme, implemented in several municipalities. Refugees benefit from direct access to housing - apartments are sublet to refugees for the first few months before leases are transferred to refugees' names. Until resources become available to refugees (through social benefits), ADOMA covers the rent and gives refugees a monthly living allowance. The location of apartments depends on the voluntary participation of municipalities. ADOMA welcomed the strong involvement of social landlords in the project, and the increased availability of housing adapted for special needs that this provides.

An ADOMA caseworker is seconded to the programme in order to accompany refugees in the first steps of their integration. Mrs. Leseq noted that the programme is good also for the reception centres for asylum seekers, which benefit from the new partnerships developed for resettled refugees. However, she regretted that the first weeks in France do not allow refugees to settle down due to the many administrative obligations they have during this period. She also questioned UNHCR on how they selected refugees to be resettled to France, specifically, since some refugees seemed deeply disappointed about what they received in France compared to their situation in the country of first asylum. The question of managing expectations before departure was again touched upon.

ADOMA and the Ministry of Interior have signed a protocol specifying the functioning and financing of the programme for Syrian refugees. So far, refugees have arrived in North-Western France (Le Havre) and in several municipalities of Nord-Isère (department in Eastern France).

**Mr. Serge Ayache (Director of the integration programme implemented in Isère – INSAIR 38)** provided participants with details on how the programme works in Nord-Isère, where a total eight families will be resettled, six of whom have already arrived. He indicated that all families benefited from the help of an interpreter upon arrival. Partnerships developed at the local level mean that all children are already attending school and health registration/treatment has been dealt with, including via a partnership developed with a local association providing access to mental health support. Mr Ayache underscored the need to receive all possible information on the refugees pre-arrival, including health-related information, so as to prepare suitable accommodation and medical care. He also stated that one full-time officer is enough for the project, but only if he/she is well supported by other staff members on specific topics.

**Mr. Djamel Cheridi (Head of the accommodation department - Coallia)** explained that **Coallia** has been involved in ad-hoc resettlement and relocation activities since the 1970s. Coallia's programme is based on the same kind of model as ADOMA's, providing p direct housing to refugees with leases in the name of Coallia for the first few months. Mr. Cheridi welcomed the strong involvement of social landlords, pointing out that up to 75 apartments were made available in two weeks.

Six families (32 people) arrived in Laon and Pinon (Northern France) on 16 May. Pre-arrival planning and information sharing meant that all identity documents and social benefits were available within the first 6 weeks. Mr. Cheridi indicated that there were some disappointments amongst refugees, but that it was nothing compared to what they faced with people relocated from Malta a few years before. He noted that it could be useful to know more about the situation of the resettled families in the country of first asylum to help unravel myths and high expectations.

The municipalities organised the reception by gathering together all relevant stakeholders and explaining the programme. The meeting was repeated three weeks after the refugees had arrived to adjust priorities and solve identified issues. It has been decided that this “steering committee” will meet every three months in the future. Mr. Cheridi insisted on the necessity of national political support and coordination, which helps to convince local elected officials to get involved.

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To close the meeting, **Mrs. Camp and Mr. Tardis** thanked the participants for their presence and participation.