



The
CENTER for
VICTIMS of
TORTURE

**Statement Submitted by the Center for Victims of Torture to the
U.S. Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and the National Interest
Oversight of the Administration's FY 2016 Refugee Resettlement Program:
Fiscal and Security Implications
October 1, 2015**

The Center for Victims of Torture (CVT) welcomes the opportunity to submit a statement for this timely and important hearing on the U.S. refugee resettlement program for FY 2016. CVT provides healing services to survivors of torture and severe war atrocities at its clinics in the United States, Jordan, Kenya, Uganda and Ethiopia and engages in training and capacity building initiatives in support of torture survivor rehabilitation programs worldwide.

As the Senate Judiciary Subcommittee on Immigration and the National Interest reviews the U.S. refugee resettlement program for FY 2016, CVT urges the distinguished members of the Subcommittee to reflect upon the mission and goals of the U.S. Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) and the global context within which it is operating. It is based upon these considerations, which are explained in greater detail below, that CVT has joined a diverse coalition of humanitarian aid, human rights, faith based and refugee service organizations in calling for the United States to commit to resettling 200,000 refugees in FY 2016, with 100,000 of them being Syrian.¹ Likewise, CVT continues to call for increased investments in specialized trauma rehabilitation services for refugee survivors of torture in the United States, as an estimated 44% of the refugees in the United States are survivors of torture.² Given the long-term impacts of torture on individuals, their families, and communities, it is essential that appropriate services are available to help refugee survivors of torture as they seek to integrate into their new lives and communities in the United States.

Global Refugee Context

In its most recent report on Global Trends, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) revealed that 59.5 million individuals worldwide are forcibly displaced “as a result of persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or human rights violations.”³ UNHCR noted “[t]his is 8.3 million persons more than the year before (51.2 million) and the highest annual increase in a single year.”⁴

The report further explained that the international community has been failing to attain solutions to ongoing conflicts or prevent new conflicts from erupting or reigniting. Meanwhile, states and the international community have also been failing to protect individuals from threats and violence from

¹ NGO letter to President Obama, September 18, 2015,

<http://www.rcusa.org/uploads/pdfs/members/Syrian%20Resettlement%20Sign-On%20Letter%209.18.15.pdf>.

² Higson-Smith, Craig, “Updating the Estimate of Refugees Resettled in the United States who Have Suffered Torture,” The Center for Victims of Torture, September 29, 2015,

http://www.cvt.org/sites/cvt.org/files/SurvivorNumberMetaAnalysis_Sept2015.pdf.

³ UNHCR, “Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2014,” <http://unhcr.org/556725e69.html>, 2.

⁴ Id.

non-state actors, such as with children being targeted by gangs in Central America or with the power and reach of ruthless terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram, al Shabab, the so-called Islamic State and countless other active organizations or militias. Consequently, in 2014 only 126,800 refugees were able to return to their home countries. This was the lowest number in 31 years.⁵

The dire reality is that, globally, as the number of forcibly displaced persons rises to levels unseen since the end of World War II, humanitarian needs are growing without corresponding increases in funding or international responsibility-sharing. The responsibility has primarily been shouldered by other war torn, impoverished or politically unstable countries.⁶ And the numbers are staggering: Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan alone are hosting over 3.5 million registered refugees, mostly from Syria.⁷ Pakistan is hosting 1.5 million registered Afghan refugees.⁸ Ethiopia and Kenya combined are hosting 1.2 million registered refugees from various countries in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa, including Somalis.⁹

The United States has a proud tradition of welcoming refugees and offering safe haven to those fleeing persecution. However, as forced displacement globally has been rising, U.S. generosity has not kept pace. There are three classic “durable” solutions for refugees—return, local integration and resettlement. When return is not a viable option due to ongoing conflict or violence and local integration is impossible, in part, because host countries are overwhelmed by the number of refugees within their borders, third country resettlement must function in a more robust and efficient manner. However, less than 1% of the world’s refugees are referred for third country resettlement.¹⁰ In FY 2013, the Department of Homeland Security reported that the United States admitted 70,000 persons as refugees through USRAP.¹¹ While 70,000 represented approximately half of UNHCR’s resettlement referrals, this only represented .001 of the total number of people forcibly displaced in the same period of time. The recent announcement by the Obama Administration of its intention to resettle 85,000 refugees in FY 2016, including at least 10,000 Syrian refugees, is a step forward but given the scale and severity of refugee needs globally, it is still far more modest than the number of people the United States can and should welcome.¹²

Recommendation: The United States should commit to resettling 200,000 refugees in FY 2016 with 100,000 of them being from Syria.

⁵ Id at 3.

⁶ UNHCR, World Refugee Day: UNHCR report finds 80 per cent of world's refugees in developing countries, June 20, 2011, <http://www.unhcr.org/4dfb66ef9.html>.

⁷ UNHCR, 2015 Sub-regional Operations Profile—Middle East, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e45ade6.html>; UNHCR, 2015 Country Operations Profile—Turkey, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e48e0fa7f&submit=GO>.

⁸ UNHCR, 2015 Country Operations Profile—Pakistan, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e487016&submit=GO>.

⁹ UNHCR, 2015 Country Operations Profile—Kenya, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e483a16&submit=GO>; UNHCR, 2015 Country Operations Profile—Ethiopia, <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e483986&submit=GO>.

¹⁰ U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration: Refugee Admissions, <http://www.state.gov/j/prm/ra/>.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Homeland Security, Annual Flow Report: Refugees and Asylees 2013, http://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/ois_rfa_fr_2013.pdf. Note that an additional 25,000 refugees were granted asylum protection in the United States during the same time frame.

¹² U.S. Department of State Official Blog, “Secretary Kerry Announces U.S. Will Increase Refugee Resettlement Numbers,” September 20, 2015, <https://blogs.state.gov/stories/2015/09/20/secretary-kerry-announces-us-will-increase-refugee-resettlement-numbers>.

Torture Survivors Resettled to the United States

Recognizing that third-country resettlement is available to less than 1% of the world's refugees, the eligibility criteria and scrutiny is quite rigid at each stage.¹³ In making a referral for resettlement, UNHCR first assesses an individual refugee for heightened vulnerability based upon its submission criteria.¹⁴ Categories for submission include (i) legal and/or physical protection needs of the refugee in the country of refuge; (ii) survivors of torture and/or violence; (iii) medical needs, in particular when life-saving treatment is unavailable in the country of refuge; (iv) women and girls at risk; (v) family reunification; (vi) children and adolescents at risk; and (vii) lack of a foreseeable alternative durable solution.¹⁵ Prior to making a resettlement referral, UNHCR conducts thorough background checks and evaluates whether any of the exclusion clauses or bars to refugee status apply. By simply being referred for resettlement by UNHCR, refugees under consideration have already undergone screening that has determined they are among the most vulnerable and not a security risk.

The United States does not rely entirely upon UNHCR evaluations in deciding to accept refugees. A UNHCR referral is only one step in a lengthy and thorough process. Refugees resettled to the United States all undergo a series of meticulous security screenings conducted by the U.S. government. These checks include multiple biographic and identity investigations; FBI biometric checks of fingerprints and photographs; in-depth, in-person interviews by specialized and well-trained Department of Homeland Security officers; medical screenings; and other checks by U.S. domestic and international intelligence agencies including the National Counterterrorism Center and National Security Council. As a result, refugees are the most thoroughly screened people to travel into the United States.

USRAP seeks to prioritize for resettlement the most vulnerable and those with the greatest humanitarian need. Annually, among the refugees who meet that criteria are thousands of survivors of torture and their families who are being given a chance to rebuild their lives in the United States. Torture survivors come from all walks of life and corners of the globe. Some were journalists or pro-democracy activists who were targeted by oppressive regimes for their activities, while some were targeted for trying to practice their religion or live in accordance with their own sexual orientation or gender identity. Others were punished because of the activities or identities of family members or friends, while others were targeted for providing humanitarian assistance. Some were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. Amnesty International found cases of torture committed by government officials in 141 countries between January 2009 and May 2013.¹⁶

For nearly 20 years, CVT has estimated that 400,000 – 500,000 refugee torture survivors live in the United States. However, based upon a meta-analysis of previous research studies, CVT has concluded that the number of refugee torture survivors in the United States could be nearly three times the previous estimate, making the refugee torture prevalence rate as high as 44 percent. Applying this percentage to the more than 3 million refugees who have arrived in the U.S. since 1975, the number of refugee torture survivors in the United States could be as high as 1.3 million without including the

¹³ Note that not all refugees who are resettled to the United States are referred through UNHCR; however, given that the majority of resettled refugees are referred by UNHCR, this statement focuses on that process.

¹⁴ UNHCR, Resettlement Handbook, Chapter Six: UNHCR Resettlement Submission Categories. <http://www.unhcr.org/3d464e842.html>.

¹⁵ Id at 243.

¹⁶ Amnesty International, "Torture in 2014: 30 Years of Broken Promises," <http://www.amnestyusa.org/sites/default/files/act400042014en.pdf>, 11.

number of torture survivors who have been granted asylum status or other forms of immigration relief.¹⁷

Torture is the intentional infliction of severe pain and suffering, physical or psychological, upon another individual. Survivors report being subjected to severe beatings, rape, deprivation, and witness to murder and torture of family members. These experiences commonly lead survivors to demonstrate symptoms such as chronic pain in muscles and joints, headaches, incessant nightmares and other sleep disorders, stomach pain and nausea, severe depression and anxiety, guilt, self-hatred, the inability to concentrate, thoughts of suicide and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Studies suggest that 40-50% of refugees who survived torture experience posttraumatic stress disorder and/or major depressive disorder and thus often require mental health care to facilitate effective integration into communities and economies.¹⁸

Effective torture survivor rehabilitation programs are able to address a survivor's physical, psychological, legal and social needs to reduce their suffering and restore functioning as quickly as possible. There are more than 40 specialized torture survivor rehabilitation programs operating in 25 states and the District of Columbia. However, all of these programs are under-resourced, under-staffed and face demands that far exceed capacity. Thus, current programming is only meeting a small fraction of the people in need and greater investments are required in order to ensure that survivors of torture have access to this lifesaving assistance.

Recommendation: Congress should increase funding to the Office of Refugee Resettlement Survivor of Torture program and pass the Torture Victims Relief Act of 2015, a bi-partisan bill championed by Senator Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and Congressman Chris Smith (R-NJ/4th).

For questions about this statement, contact Annie Sovcik, Director of the Washington Office at the Center for Victims of Torture at asovcik@cvt.org; 202-822-0188.

¹⁷ See *supra* at 10.

¹⁸ Steel Z, Chey T, Silove D, Marnane C, Bryant RA, van Ommeren M., "Association of torture and other potentially traumatic events with mental health outcomes among populations exposed to mass conflict and displacement: a systematic review and meta-analysis," *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*, August 2009, abstract available at <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/19654388>.