

REFUGEE

FALL 2018 ISSUE

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Front cover: Morsheda, 12, and her 10-month-old niece, Nisma, go for a walk in the early morning to warm up from the cold inside their shelter at Kutupalong Camp in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh. Since late August of 2017, more than 700,000 Rohingya fled to the country to escape an outbreak of violence in neighbouring Myanmar. UNHCR is working with the Bangladeshi Government to provide Rohingya refugees with protection, food, clean water, shelter, health care, trauma counselling and reunification for separated families.

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Welcome to *REFUGE*



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Jean-Nicolas Beuze
UNHCR Representative in Canada

We've all felt it. After a long, hard day out in an increasingly stressful world, we return to what feels like our own personal refuge—our home.

Oxford Living Dictionaries defines *refuge* as “the state of being safe or sheltered from pursuit, danger, or difficulty.” Refuge is what over 25 million people (of the 68.5 million displaced) seek around the globe, fleeing from dangers we can only imagine, including persecution, violence, war and disaster.

REFUGE is also the new name of your UNHCR Canada magazine, now home to more stories and photos on refugees, asylum seekers and displaced people in Canada and around the world. You'll read about how your support allows UNHCR to help the most vulnerable.

While our format is new, our mission remains the same—to inform, engage and hopefully inspire you to change the world for the better—not just for refugees, but for everyone.

We hope that our cover story does just that: on page 8 we bring you the untold stories of Rohingya refugees one year since the mass exodus of more than 700,000 from Myanmar.

“Our mission remains the same—to inform, engage and hopefully inspire you to change the world for the better—not just for refugees, but for everyone.”

Many readers are familiar with Syrian refugees' efforts to resettle in Canada, working incredibly hard to adapt to a completely new language, culture and life. But many more, including millions of Syrian children, are facing another winter in desperate circumstances around the world. What is that like for a child? On page 6, we bring you difficult stories that must be told, and how UNHCR is there to help.

Harry Leslie Smith, at 95 years young, is pleased that Canada has accepted almost 55,000 Syrian refugees since 2015, but feels passionately that the world has turned its back on refugees.

I'm deeply inspired by Harry's story, found on page 4. This British-Canadian war veteran is highlighting the plight of refugees and advocating for humane treatment and global solutions through his astonishing multi-country tour.

One of Harry's stops was Roxham Road, an irregular border crossing straddling Quebec and New York State that has attracted asylum seekers hoping to find refuge in Canada. I have also spent time at Roxham Road, speaking with asylum seekers, local community members and government officials. I invite you to read my opinion piece on page 14 where I address the current rhetoric suggesting the number of people entering Canada at these irregular crossings represents a refugee “crisis.”

Welcome to *REFUGE*. There is much more to discover within this issue and we are so grateful for your interest and support of UNHCR Canada's work. **R**



A rebel for refugees

Guided by his past, a 95-year-old activist embarks on a global tour to highlight the plight of refugees

By Fiona Irvine-Goulet

Harry Leslie Smith is seen at Sojourn House in Toronto, July 2018.

Harry Leslie Smith may well be Canada's oldest rebel activist. At 95, he refuses to retire gently into the night, instead furiously working his Twitter account to tell his more than 200,000 followers what he thinks about the state of the world. On his radar: Human rights. Brexit. Universal health care. History repeating itself. And the plight of refugees.

The fact that there are millions of people around the globe fleeing war, violence and persecution makes Harry angry. "We shouldn't be leaving anyone out, no matter what their nationality, colour or race is," he says. "Humanity is the key to peace."

Harry speaks from the heart, but also from experience. In 1945 as a young British soldier in the Royal Air Force, he saw 100,000 emaciated, desperate refugees flowing out of Germany.

"We would stop and give them whatever excess food supplies we had on the trucks," he says, emotion choking his voice. "We would show them that they were safe and no one was going to hurt them. I think for the first time I saw a gleam of hope in their faces."

That experience, coupled with an impoverished childhood spent in Yorkshire, England, where his sister died of tuberculosis because the family couldn't afford a doctor, helped to transform him into a late-blooming social justice warrior.

It was the financial crisis of 2008 that propelled him into writing books—his latest is *Don't Let My Past Be Your Future*, published in 2017. He pens op-ed pieces for newspapers including Britain's *Independent*. He is embarking on speaking engagements, and creating a podcast, all dedicated to highlighting injustice and addressing the current—and future—political climate.

Last year, with the help of a GoFundMe page, Harry embarked on his "Harry's Last Stand" tour, dedicated to travelling to as many "refugee hot

spots" as possible to raise a rallying cry for the global refugee crisis.

He has met with Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's principal secretary Gerald Butts, visited an irregular border crossing between Quebec and New York State, and met this summer with refugees and city officials in Toronto.

In 2017 he travelled to Calais, France, site of an infamous makeshift camp for asylum seekers hoping to cross into Britain. It was closed down by French authorities but continues to exist, with people often camping in squalid and unsafe conditions.

"Calais was so frightening," Harry recalls. "I could not believe it when I stepped into the camp. It reminded me of when my unit reached Hamburg, Germany. . . . I felt so sorry when this young boy sidled up to me. He was 10. He was in Calais alone. He had lost his parents. How can we allow that?"

He is more hopeful about the future for refugees arriving in Canada, citing that Canada is a newer and younger country, lacking in old world political and religious baggage.

"[Refugees] will stand a much better chance just to survive in this country," he believes. "There's trepidation at the beginning but we must offer a full acceptance of their desire to live with us and amongst us."

Harry is aware of the fear-mongering and rhetoric that can hamper acceptance of newcomers to Canada. When asked what Canadians can do to promote tolerance and acceptance, his message is clear: "Stop the rhetoric that says refugees want to take our jobs. That's never been proven."

He is also crystal clear on how we must learn from the past, urging all people to tell political leaders that we are not going to war. "We have to live together," he says emphatically. "It's our only hope of survival." **R**

Jeff Beardsall

Hear more from Harry Leslie Smith as he meets with refugees in our special video. Please visit youtube.com/UNHCRCanada



Cold comfort

Amira and her family received life-saving winter assistance

Thousands more are in urgent need of the same

By Lauren La Rose



Syrian refugee Amira wraps a blanket around her three-year-old daughter Amani at their home in Lebanon.

As the temperatures plunge, the checklist of items needed to stay warm surges. But what if you couldn't count on that bin stocked with scarves, toques and mittens? No woollen socks and sweaters? No snowsuit to bundle up your little one? No furnace or fireplace to heat your home?

Winter ushers in a season of uncertainty for many refugees who often lack the essentials so desperately needed to protect their families—especially children—during the coldest months of the year.

Before the war in Syria, Amira lived in Aleppo with her husband, Hamad, who worked in a clothing factory. Amira says they were able to provide themselves with everything they needed. That was no longer the reality when conflict uprooted the couple from their beloved home. A life of familiarity made way for an unpredictable future.

Amira and Hamad relocated to Lebanon where they moved frequently, sometimes staying with relatives. They were often living in tents that offered an inadequate shield from the biting cold of winter.

After the birth of their first child, Amani, they now had a daughter to consider.

UNHCR provided Amira and her family with wood and other materials to reinforce a shelter against Lebanon's Bekka Valley snow and wind, as well as winter cash assistance to buy fuel, food and other essentials.

“If we didn't have assistance from UNHCR... we would have lived a very difficult winter,” Amira says. “We couldn't have warmed our shelter or even warmed Amani.”

UNHCR plans to provide winter assistance to more than four million Syrian and Iraqi internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees in Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Turkey.

Winter assistance comes in the form of cash payments and distribution of winter items, as well as key preventive measures, like insulating and repairing shelters.

The winter assistance plan for the Middle East and North Africa has only reached 26 percent of its funding target. The majority of country operations are severely underfunded. This could mean thousands of families won't have the basic essentials to guard against the frigid conditions.

But it's much more than just keeping warm. For refugees and displaced people forced from their homes, individuals like Amira once again have the chance to draw comfort and security in their new surroundings.

“I'm very proud of my house, and I always keep it clean and tidy,” Amira explains with a smile.

Finally, she feels what so many take for granted: a place to feel sheltered and protected, throughout the winter and beyond. **R**

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For more information, please visit unhcr.ca/winter



The Rohingya: Voices from the crisis

Stories of heartbreak, hope and resilience
in the world's largest refugee settlement

2017

TIMELINE OF AN EMERGENCY

AUGUST

AUGUST 25

Myanmar state media reports that 12 security officers have been killed by Rohingya insurgents. An army crackdown in Rakhine state triggers an exodus of the stateless Muslim minority. Over the next four days, the number of refugees reaching Bangladesh on foot and by boat soars to several thousand.

SEPTEMBER

SEPTEMBER 28

Nine children are among at least 14 refugees drowned when a boat capsizes in the Bay of Bengal. UN Secretary General António Guterres tells the Security Council the Rohingya refugee crisis is a "human rights nightmare."

OCTOBER

OCTOBER 30

The Government of Canada launches the Myanmar Crisis Relief Fund. Every dollar donated for Rohingya emergency to registered Canadian charities between Aug. 25 and Nov. 28 matched by federal government.

DECEMBER

DECEMBER 1

By Day 100, UNHCR has provided emergency aid including 93,000 tarpaulins for shelters, 178,000 blankets and 36,000 sets of kitchen utensils to refugees. It has provided access to water and latrines to over 100,000 people, and medical attention and counselling to nearly 60,000.

DECEMBER 13

Canadian government announces it will match \$12.55 million donated by Canadians for Rohingya refugees. This brings Canada's overall humanitarian response to this crisis to more than \$37.5 million.

Who are the Rohingya?

The Rohingya are an ethnic minority, mostly Muslim, living in Myanmar, a predominantly Buddhist country. They are the world's largest group of stateless people as the authorities never recognized their citizenship, which denies them access to health care, education and employment. Prior to the mass exodus of Rohingya refugees in 2017, more than 200,000 had previously fled persecution and violence in Myanmar.





They have survived the unimaginable. Beatings. Torture. Sexual Violence. Homes burned. Villages destroyed. Loved ones lost.

On August 25, 2017, an outbreak of violence in Myanmar's Rakhine State ignited a mass exodus of Rohingya refugees. More than 700,000 were forced to flee. The vast majority are women and children. More than a year on, UNHCR continues to work in tandem with its partners to provide Rohingya refugees with the essentials: shelter, food, access to clean water, education, health care and psychological counselling.

In the face of unspeakable horrors, against incredible odds, the Rohingya remain resilient. They are forging ahead with determination and perseverance to rebuild their lives. Here are a few of their stories.

Rohingya refugees shelter beneath umbrellas as they make their way down a footpath during a heavy monsoon downpour in Camp 4, Kutupalong Expansion Site for Rohingya refugees, Ukhiya, Cox's Bazar District, Bangladesh.

Photos on pages 8–11: ©UNHCR/David Azia

2018

KEY DATES IN THE ROHINGYA CRISIS

MAY

MAY 4

UNHCR rushes additional aid to Bangladesh where the first monsoon rains hit the Cox's Bazar district. Humanitarian partners estimate that up to 200,000 Rohingya refugees could be at risk during the monsoon season. Many live on rugged terrain prone to landslides and flooding and are in urgent need of relocation.

JULY

JULY 25

UNHCR's monsoon preparedness efforts are put to the test as 463 millimetres of rain pours down across the Cox's Bazar district in a single day. By mid-August, more than 24,000 refugees in locations vulnerable to landslides had been relocated by UNHCR to safer areas.

AUGUST

AUGUST 28

UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Cate Blanchett urges UN Security Council to address "pressing needs" of Rohingya refugees. "Nothing could have prepared me for the extent and depth of the suffering I saw," she said. "I am a mother, and I saw my children in the eyes of every single refugee child I met."

By the numbers



723,076 Rohingya refugees arrived in Bangladesh between August 25, 2017 and July 18, 2018

205,000 Rohingya families in Bangladesh



55% of refugees in Bangladesh are children under the age of 18



On steady ground

Khadija Khatum knows what it's like to live through a landslide.

In June 2018, at the height of southeastern Bangladesh's monsoon season, Khadija and her family lost their shelter to a sudden landslide. Although none of her family members—her 60-year-old mother Suvia, 10-year-old daughter Nur Kalima and four-year-old son Saiful—were injured, they lost most of their scant belongings to the torrent of water and mud. They were quickly taken in and given shelter by fellow Rohingya refugee families who lived nearby.

It was the second time in less than a year that they had lost their home. The family was among hundreds of thousands of Rohingya forced to flee Myanmar when an outbreak of violence arrived at their doorstep.

"It took us 14 days to reach safety here in Bangladesh," Khadija said.

"Everywhere, there was beating, shooting and burning. We walked the whole way then crossed the river on a bamboo raft."

“When we arrived in this camp after our long journey, there was food, shelter and other care available,” she continued. “It was something I couldn’t have even imagined.”

And just like when Khadija's family first arrived in Kutupalong, UNHCR was there for them. Throughout this difficult time, staff kept in close contact with Khadija and others affected by the landslide. One day, she received good news: UNHCR had built her family a new shelter in a safe, flat area of the settlement and they would be relocated.

When moving day came, Khadija's family had plenty of assistance: 10 volunteers to help carry their remaining household belongings, and a vehicle to transport her mother, who has difficulty walking long distances.

"When we lived on the hillside, my children didn't have space to play," she said. "Here, there are more opportunities, and they can make new friends."

"Here, we can freely run and play," agreed 10-year-old Nur Kalima. "Here, we're enjoying happy moments together."



A place to share

Sharmin Ara never had the chance to attend school in Myanmar. Today, with help from UNHCR, she's finally found a place where she can learn—and share—alongside other young Rohingya refugee women.

That place is a brightly coloured, girls-only space called the Dream Garden Adolescent Club. As many as 45 young women between the ages of 15 and 24 gather daily to learn about life skills, women's health and how to protect themselves—as well as nurture each other.

All of that is new to 18-year-old Sharmin.

"In Myanmar, we had no access to school. Because of the dangers, I wasn't even able to go outside and meet with friends," she explained. "Now I'm free and can share my feelings."

Considering everything she's been through, sharing is an essential activity.

Sharmin fled Myanmar 11 months ago when her village, Shikderpara, was attacked. Her mother died along the way. Sharmin finally found safety in Bangladesh after an agonizing one-week journey on foot, arriving in the Kutupalong settlement with her father and two sisters.

While life skills training at the Adolescent Club is helping Sharmin learn a vocation, she is helping young women expand their horizons every day. As a club co-facilitator, UNHCR has given her special training to coordinate art, games and storytelling that empower young women to express themselves.

"I feel proud to be here," she said. "In this space, girls are able to share their feelings, their thoughts and their dreams."

To learn more about UNHCR's work with Rohingya refugees and how you can help, please visit unhcr.ca/bangladesh



Safe harbour

The agony and uncertainty of fleeing her home in Myanmar is still fresh for **Shatara Begum**.

While the flow of Rohingya refugees slowed significantly since the beginning of 2018, almost 12,000 people have arrived since January. Shatara, her husband, mother, mother-in law, and 14-month-old daughter Shatara are among them.

It took Shatara and her family five days to reach safety, clambering over mountainous terrain as monsoon rains and winds raged.

“The journey was hard and horrible. We had to walk day and night,” she explained.”

“We took shelter along the way under trees and, when we could, with villagers who agreed to help us.”

When they reached the Naf River—the border between Myanmar and southeastern Bangladesh—Shatara’s family had to pay the equivalent of about US\$60 to cross in a makeshift boat. Soon after disembarking and setting foot in Bangladesh, they were told where to find the UNHCR transit centre and what help they could expect.

“When we arrived, we received food and water, and also health care,” Shatara said. “And then we were given a temporary shelter.”

UNHCR will relocate her family to a more permanent shelter. For now, Shatara said that she and her family feel safe—and she’s especially grateful for the support she’s receiving for her baby daughter.

Shatara is participating in a mother’s group where she’s learning about breastfeeding, hygiene, nutrition and play activities. She’s also receiving therapeutic food for her baby, who is malnourished as a result of their harrowing journey from Myanmar.

“The counselling centre here has told me how to keep my baby happy and healthy,” Shatara explained. “It’s really good advice. I’ve never had any help like this before.”



Humanitarian in action

Dr. Amany Sadek, 35, is a public health officer for UNHCR. For the past nine months she has worked with Rohingya refugees in settlements near Cox’s Bazar, Bangladesh. We spoke to her recently about her experiences.

What has the UNHCR health team been able to accomplish for/with Rohingya refugees over the last year?

A year ago, there were only four health units in the Kutupalong and Nayapara refugee camps. Today, there are 22 health care facilities under UNHCR coordination, spread throughout the camps. These include primary health care units, in-patient facilities, delivery units and women-only spaces. In addition, we’ve established an extended network of ambulances to transport patients with severe illnesses or other critical needs to secondary health facilities outside the camps.

Is there a particular story from a Rohingya refugee that has stayed with you?

Once while conducting a household health survey, an elderly Rohingya refugee lady invited us into her shelter. She was pointing at us, to herself and to the sky. Her neighbours helped translate, and this is what she said:

“God sent you to save our lives and to care for us...we love you all dearly.”

What are some of the ongoing needs for Rohingya refugees?

For so long, Rohingya refugees have been deprived of basic human rights and basic human needs, deprived of proper health care access, education and protection. Now that Bangladesh has provided them a safer place to live, it’s a great opportunity for humanity to help us support them and show them kindness by providing a better and healthier future for children, mothers, the elderly and all Rohingya refugees. **R**



On the front lines in Bangladesh

By Matthew Brook, as told to Lauren La Rose



Matthew Brook calls Garden Bay, B.C., home, but he has travelled well beyond Canada's borders to help countless refugees in need. He has been with UNHCR since 2000, working in countries including Angola, Colombia and Tanzania. Yet the veteran staffer faced a fresh set of challenges on the front lines of the Rohingya emergency.

He was deployed to Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, in October 2017 where he served as a Senior Field/ Technical Coordinator. He was part of an emergency response team to support the Government of Bangladesh in providing protection and assistance to the hundreds of thousands of Rohingya refugees displaced from Myanmar.

My first week in Bangladesh I travelled to Anjuman Para on the border with Myanmar. Thousands of refugees were strung out along the rice paddy and river embankments waiting patiently to be allowed to move from the border area into the refugee settlements, after having walked for days—or even weeks—fleeing Myanmar.

Refugees, including the elderly, individuals with disabilities, day-old babies and expectant mothers sat in the open sun without sanitation, food or water. Working with other humanitarian organizations, UNHCR managed to provide a basic level of assistance, including improvising by hiring a local boat to deliver food along the embankments, and negotiating with border authorities to allow the critically ill to be evacuated for medical assistance.

A few days later, the refugees were finally permitted to start making their way to the refugee settlements—a seemingly endless line of human beings walking with all of their collective belongings on their backs. We quickly realized that our capacity was overwhelmed in terms of receiving refugees at our main distribution point in Kutupalong, the main refugee settlement. A Médecins Sans Frontières (Doctors Without Borders) colleague and I decided to set up an extra distribution point on the spur of the moment. Within an hour, we had a system in place to direct people into two lines: to receive food in one line, and blankets, tarps, sleeping mats and other basic necessities in the other. Over the space of a few short hours, we managed to provide basic assistance for more than 3,000 new arrivals before darkness fell amid torrential rains.

“Over the space of a few short hours, we managed to provide basic assistance for more than 3,000 new arrivals before darkness fell amid torrential rains.”

Later on in my deployment, UNHCR, working together with the Bangladeshi government and other partners, opened up new zones of the refugee settlements with better access to services like health, education, water and sanitation. Tens of thousands of kits were delivered to refugees to build improved shelters. Teams were established to identify and address protection risks, and even initiated a programme to reduce the possibility of wild elephants trampling refugees in their shelters.

The contributions provided by UNHCR supporters were fundamental to refugees receiving basic protection and assistance in the early days of the crisis. This, combined with the phenomenal industriousness and resilience demonstrated by the refugees, allowed for a significant improvement in their condition.

Going forward, continued support is critical, particularly given the torrential monsoon rains currently afflicting the refugee settlements. **R**

Matthew Brook (centre) is seen among Rohingya refugees at the Kutupalong refugee settlement, Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, November 2017.

©UNHCR/Roger Arnold



A man holds up a sign in support of asylum seekers during a rally outside the Olympic Stadium in Montreal, Sunday, August 6, 2017.

Opinion: There is a refugee crisis — but not in Canada

By Jean-Nicolas Beuze, UNHCR Canada Representative



©THE CANADIAN PRESS/Graham Hughes

Those seeking asylum in Canada are not breaking any laws

People who are forced to use any means, including walking up a dirt road into Quebec in search of a safe haven, often do not have the option of getting a passport or appropriate visas before escaping their plight.

Canadian law is clear: under the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, regardless of how or where they came into the country, those claiming refugee protection cannot be charged with an offence. It is wrong to call asylum seekers “illegals.”

Canada has well-established protocols and processes to handle claimants

When an asylum seeker enters Canada, the process is also clear. After a claimant’s account has been heard, the Immigration and Refugee Board must decide whether that person would be risking their life by returning home.

There are those fleeing conflicts, such as in Syria or South Sudan, and also female survivors of sexual violence. There are girls at risk of forced marriage or female genital mutilation and boys at risk of forcible recruitment in paramilitary groups or criminal gangs. As well, LGBTI individuals and members of religious or ethnic minorities are also among the vulnerable. All of them may be persecuted for who they are and what they stand for. All of them need our protection.

Canada has rolled out response plans, and is continuing to adjust them. Based on UNHCR’s months of observation and interviews with asylum-seekers, government authorities, and civil society organizations, I hold Canadians in high esteem for their efficient and humane handling of these individuals.

Yet while Canada has the means to put in place adequate services, other countries and communities are struggling with an influx of refugees. A year after the emotional response provoked by images of desperate and exhausted Rohingya, UNHCR has only 40 percent of the funding needed to supply food and basic shelter to hundreds of thousands in need.

Ultimately, behind the numbers, laws and processes, are individual stories. Personal tragedies abound but so do acts of courage and resilience. Every story is unique, but each one connects us to our common humanity.

For all these reasons, it is wrong and irresponsible to instill fears about refugees in Canada. Facts matter. Words matter. Today’s refugee crisis is not here—but it is in countries that border conflict zones in Africa or the Middle East. We can learn from those countries that, despite meagre resources, courageously and proudly welcome hundreds of thousands of refugees.

And I know that we can count on you to reach out to your friends and political leaders to spread the word that you believe that Canada is not facing a crisis. On the contrary, we can do even more to support refugees here and around the globe. **R**

Since the increase in the number of people irregularly crossing into Quebec from New York State last summer, alarmist rhetoric about Canada being overwhelmed by refugees has resurfaced. I have argued, in Parliament and in the media, that this is a dangerous and unfounded narrative that seeks to dehumanize people who flee wars and persecution.

Here are the facts:

Canada can manage the numbers

In 2017, 50,000 people claimed asylum in Canada. Last September, in one single day 50,000 Rohingya crossed the muddy Naf River to seek safety in Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh, with some dying while trying.

In a country as wealthy and well-governed as Canada, 50,000 people is a manageable number. This figure represents less than 0.2 percent of refugees worldwide in 2017.

But numbers are becoming an issue for the frontline countries that accept the majority of asylum seekers. Countries like Uganda, Bangladesh and Mexico that struggle with endemic poverty, have opened their doors to hundreds of thousands of refugees, including legions of children and women escaping violence from criminal gangs.



Snapshot of a country in crisis

Soaring inflation, shortages of food and medicine, violence and political unrest are causing Venezuelans to leave, many with only the clothes on their backs



5,000 Venezuelans are leaving every day

As of early 2018, at least 5,000 Venezuelans continue to leave their country daily, with 90 percent staying within South America. While Colombia receives the highest number, many Venezuelans opt to continue their route farther south, at times risking their lives. The majority are families with young children, pregnant women, the elderly and people with disabilities.



Over 1.6 million

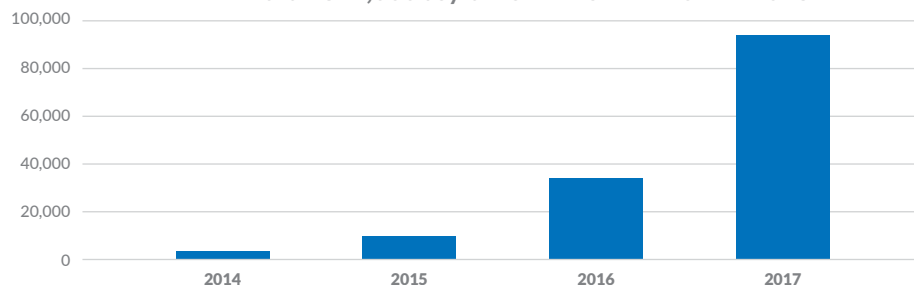
Venezuelans displaced in the region since 2015



3,000%

increase in asylum claims since 2014

More than 324,000 asylum seekers from 2014 - 2018



Colombia and UNHCR partner to register 442,000 Venezuelans

In April 2017, with support from UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration, the Colombian government's mass registration of Venezuelans in the country resulted in the registration of 442,462 individuals (253,575 families). In August, the government granted them the Special Stay Permit that allows full access to rights for two years' status. This means people will have access to health care, schooling and employment, all critical to living and working in their adopted country.

For more information, please visit unhcr.ca/venezuela



Ricardo Roa-Beltran

UNHCR Canada protection officer **Nadia Williamson** (fifth from right in baseball cap and blue vest) is seen in Riohacha, Colombia, during World Refugee Day celebrations in June 2018.

Violence and dire conditions have driven 1.6 million people from Venezuela

Two UNHCR protection officers give frontline accounts of desperate Venezuelans

As told to Fiona Irvine-Goulet

UNHCR Canada protection officer **Azadeh Tamjeedi** is seen with refugee children in Boa Vista, Brazil.

©UNHCR/Azadeh Tamjeedi



Canadians **Azadeh Tamjeedi** and **Nadia Williamson** are protection officers for UNHCR in Canada. They were recently deployed on emergency missions to Boa Vista, Brazil (Azadeh) and Riohacha, Colombia (Nadia) to assist with UNHCR's efforts to help Venezuelan asylum seekers find safety, food, shelter and medicine.

Give us a brief description of what your role is in helping Venezuelan asylum seekers who have fled their country.

Azadeh: Our offices are working in partnership with the Brazilian government to respond to the needs of Venezuelans, about 800 of whom arrive daily into Brazil. Managing a site in Boa Vista that houses people who are vulnerable, have specific needs and have recently left a very difficult situation is challenging and encompasses a variety of tasks, from ensuring adequate sanitation conditions on the sites to supporting survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

Nadia: I was deployed in Riohacha, Colombia, to help with the arrival of thousands of Venezuelans. I arrived at a critical time, helping to set up registration systems, and working closely with government and non-government partners to provide for the most urgent needs.

What are Venezuelans telling you about why they are leaving their country?

Azadeh: Many Venezuelans I met left for the simple reason that they had no medicine or food needed to survive. For example, I met a woman with stage 4 cancer and she could not access medication for her pain or palliative care.

What is amazing to me is that all these people with medical problems and/or young children would walk for weeks to make it to Brazil, which speaks to their desperation and the dire humanitarian situation in Venezuela.

Many people told me that they left because there was simply no food left in the country, they were starving and searching for a better life for their children. One Spanish phrase I heard over and over again was, "En Venezuela no tengo nada." (In Venezuela, I have nothing.)

Nadia: I heard many stories of desperation. I interviewed a mother of two young children who had recently arrived in Riohacha. I asked why she had left her home and family behind and why she preferred to live on the streets. Her response was simple but powerful: "So that my children can eat."

Azadeh, give us a picture of the situation for Venezuelans seeking safety and security in Boa Vista.

Azadeh: Venezuelans in Boa Vista are living in temporary sites with shelter or refugee housing units and receive food every day provided by the Brazilian army. The situation is not ideal. The weather is very hot, humid and rainy.

There are lots of children and many are not registered to go to school. Venezuelans who do not live in the sites live on the streets, often with young children.

Nadia, you recently returned from Riohacha, Colombia, the country most affected by the exodus from Venezuela, with over 3,000 people arriving daily. What are conditions like there for Venezuelan asylum seekers?

Nadia: Basic services like water and electricity are lacking and there is a high unemployment rate in Riohacha. The region's ability to cope with this influx of people is limited despite their strong desire to help.

It was shocking to see the dire conditions in which Venezuelans arrived, with a range of illnesses, with few clothes and malnourished. Trying to meet all these urgent needs with limited resources remains a big challenge. Many Venezuelans in Riohacha sleep on the streets as the money they make on a daily basis goes to feeding their families. Many Venezuelan women have had to resort to prostitution and children are being recruited by criminal groups. Despite these challenges, everyone I interviewed stated they were better off in Riohacha than in Venezuela.


What is the single most important thing for Canadians to understand about the growing humanitarian crisis in Venezuela?

Azadeh: That they are fleeing to save their lives because their home country is crumbling.

Nadia: I think most Canadians are unaware of the magnitude of this socio-economic and political situation that has affected over 1.6 million Venezuelans who since 2015, have left their country. It has been the biggest outflow in the modern history of Latin America.

What motivates/inspires you to work in this field?

Azadeh: My own family had to leave their country because of the political situation. The stories they told me as a young child about how and why they left motivated me to help people in similar situations. I guess you could say my family was my initial inspiration, and now the resilience of the refugees and asylum seekers that I meet inspires me to continue this work.

Nadia: The perseverance and determination of the most vulnerable people inspire me. Just putting a smile on a child's face who has travelled five hours to get to safety and find food, clean water and shelter motivates me to keep working hard to continue helping those most in need. As a mother, I am also highly motivated by my children. 



Conflict in Somalia forced long-lost relatives to flee decades apart

**An unexpected connection
brought them together in Canada**

By Lauren La Rose

Ali Wasuge (left) shares a laugh with his niece Iqra Ali Gaal at her home in Hamilton, Ont.

Sharing a birthplace and a mutual Facebook connection made it easy for Ali Wasuge and Iqra Ali Gaal to forge a friendship online. Yet after exchanging details about life in their homeland of Somalia, Wasuge soon realized just how deep their connection was.

“I asked Iqra... which village was she living in Mogadishu? She told me (the name of) a village which I’m so familiar (with), where I also used to live.

“And then I asked her: ‘Maybe you are my neighbour?’”

As it turns out, they weren’t just linked by geography: they were bound by blood.

Civil war was among the reasons Wasuge left the East African nation of Somalia in September of 1992, two years before Gaal—his niece—was even born.

“Day after day, the situation was getting worse and worse. I couldn’t go back to my country. And I wasn’t financially (able) at that time to go to some other place than Ethiopia.”

He relocated to the capital of Addis Ababa, working as a translator at the Canadian Embassy. A decade later, he resettled in Canada as a refugee. He initially called London, Ont., home before later relocating to Toronto, finding work at the city’s international airport. He eventually met and settled down with his wife with whom he shares three children.

Born on New Year’s Day in 1994, Gaal had lived her entire life in the Somali capital of Mogadishu. She worked alongside her mother and sister as tea sellers in the market. Most of the time, Gaal said her mother would send her home early and would work into the evening, with Fridays off to rest.

“Mum was a very hardworking woman with a vision of progressing in life.”

It would be a life cut brutally short.

One day in 2011, her mother never made it back home as gunfire erupted in the market.

“Mum got shot after fighting broke out between militia around the area,” Gaal recalled. “When she was taken to hospital she died.”

Sadly, personal tragedy continued to disrupt her path. “I had to escape Somalia after receiving threatening calls from al-Shabaab (militants) several times. I was scared,” she recalled.

“I wanted to escape to anywhere I would feel safe.”

She arrived in Jordan in March of 2013, and found friends to help connect her with the UN for support; but she was too far from siblings and other family members to lean on. Then in 2014, she lost her father who died while crossing the Mediterranean Sea.

Years later, her newfound digital connection proved to be the lifeline she needed to embark on a pivotal next step. Eventually, with UNHCR’s support, Wasuge was able to bring Gaal to Canada. Within just a year of their first interaction online, Wasuge was at Toronto’s Pearson airport with his wife and children to welcome Gaal into the fold.

Since arriving in February 2018, Gaal lives in an apartment in Hamilton, Ont.

“People I’ve met here are very good and they welcome me warmly,” said Gaal.

She heeded her uncle’s guidance of making education a priority to help integrate into Canadian life.

Gaal is enrolled in the federally funded Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada program, or LINC, which offers free language training for eligible adult learners.

Gaal’s classroom at Collège Boréal in Hamilton is dotted with long lined sheets of white paper stuck with colourful cutouts of household items connected by key words. The goal is to help educate and inform the fledgling group of LINC students seeking to gain a better grasp of the English language.

“She’s always helping the other students,” said instructor Edward Cowan.

“She does her homework, she takes extra classes outside of school. She’s got great retention for the vocabulary and the grammar that she’s studied. So my experience with Iqra in class has been overall very, very positive.

“She’s always been quite confident and very open. And she’s not afraid of failure or taking any risks.”

Gaal hopes to pursue further studies and eventually work as a nurse, a passion she first nurtured during a course in Somalia.

Her uncle shares her hope for brighter days ahead.

“Iqra, she’s very kind, very loyal, very good personality,” said Wasuge. “I hope her future will be fruitful.” **R**

Hear more from Iqra and get a window into her new life in Canada.
Please visit [youtube.com/UNHCRCanada](https://www.youtube.com/UNHCRCanada)

“Thank you for welcoming all of me”

Facing persecution in Honduras, Marco found safety and a fresh start in Canada

By Erla Cabrera



©UNHCR/Erla Cabrera

Marco had to hide who he really was: his life depended on it.

In his native Honduras, he was never open about his sexual orientation. He was not ashamed of being gay; he believed most people around him knew he was. Yet, he lived with a lingering fear of being shunned or physically attacked if he were to open up about his sexuality.

In June 2016, Marco's worst fears came true as he became a target of local gang members in Honduras.

“I was harassed, threatened and almost assaulted on several occasions. I tried moving in with my sister who lived in another city, but they found me there as well and I didn't want to put her in danger. So, I decided I had to leave Honduras.”

The North of Central America, made up of Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, is facing chronic high levels of violence from gangs and drug cartels. They are forcibly recruiting children, kidnapping to extort money from small business owners, sexually abusing women and girls, and threatening lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) individuals. For thousands of people from the region, fear, trauma and horrific violence have become a part of their daily lives. This is especially true for those who are LGBTI.

In many parts of the world, LGBTI individuals are extremely vulnerable. They often experience discrimination and violence in their home countries, which includes sexual abuse, lack of legal protection and access to basic services.

Marco fled to Mexico having little to no knowledge about the asylum process or what it meant to be a refugee. Upon reaching the southern border he was stopped by immigration officials and placed in detention while he awaited a decision about his case. “It was overcrowded and unbearable. I was terrified and alone. I didn't know what my rights were and cried at the thought of this being the end of my journey to safety since I would see people being deported daily.”

After about a month, Marco was finally connected with UNHCR and brought

to a shelter in the town of Tenosique that was a safe space for LGBTI people. He stayed at the shelter for about 10 months, opting out of living on his own since he felt protected and liked being close to people he knew.

One day, Marco was attacked, once again because of his sexual orientation, by a group of men along the road to a local river. “I thought I was going to die that day. I was so ashamed and wanted no one to know what happened.”

After some hesitation, Marco confided in someone at the shelter who convinced him to see a doctor and speak to a lawyer. From there, a police report was filed and UNHCR worked to have him transferred quickly to a shelter in Mexico City to keep him safe until a more permanent solution could be found.

In January 2018, Marco was resettled by UNHCR to Canada. Now at home in Sherbrooke, Quebec, he is excited to be attending French classes and aspires to become a police officer. He is also volunteering with the local LGBTI community in hopes that his story can help others.

“Now I go to class with people from different backgrounds, with different reasons for fleeing, but all with the hope of building a new life in safety. I want to say thank you to Canada. Thank you for welcoming all of me.” **R**



Asha Kayd

(From left to right) **Samer Al Jbawi**, **Bille Avdalla** and **Ali Malash** of the Somali Centre for Family Services. The Ottawa-based community hub for newcomers raised more than \$20,000 for UNHCR in support of Syrians displaced by the ongoing crisis.

Centre of gratitude

A vital Canadian community hub for newcomers raises funds for Syrians displaced by crisis

By Lauren La Rose

Samer Al Jbawi is living proof of the power of paying it forward.

Originally from Syria, Samer resettled in Canada where he has spent more than two years working at the Somali Centre for Family Services in Ottawa.

When the centre opened in 1991, it was originally established to respond to the large influx of Somali newcomers, with a focus towards preserving culture and heritage. Yet, it became clear the needs

extended into the area of settlement, integration, and counselling.

“The two major things really I’m focusing on are to help people learn English and to help them understand the Canadian culture,” said Samer.

The centre has welcomed newcomers from a vast range of backgrounds and nationalities, while remaining mindful of the millions worldwide in desperate need of support.

The ongoing conflict in Syria was the focus of renewed attention earlier this year as an escalation in fierce fighting in areas including eastern Ghouta resulted in the displacement of thousands of Syrians.

“We noticed how UNHCR was trying to support civilians with food and shelter and medical help,” recalled Samer of the emergency humanitarian response.

The centre partnered with the local Syrian community to raise funds for civilians in Ghouta. They also hoped the event would help bring together a diverse group of residents to learn from and support Syrian neighbours.

The fundraiser featured a dinner of traditional Syrian foods, and included a screening of a short film showing the current realities of life in Syria.

More than \$20,000 was raised for UNHCR.

“People should know that UNHCR is a very trusted organization,” said Samer. “We trust their staff and we believe that they are working very hard to deliver donations to people who are in need.

“We know that their staff are on the ground and they are in direct touch with the crises happening all over the world, especially in Syria.”

Samer also reflected on his own time as a refugee in Jordan, which included a brief stay at the Za’atari Refugee Camp, as testimony to UNHCR’s work in the field.

“I saw the UNHCR staff and I know how they used to help as much as they can. That’s why we selected UNHCR.” **R**

Competing in a walk, ride or race? Hosting a games night? Organizing a bake sale? There is no shortage of ways to raise funds for refugees.

Let us help you get started. Please visit fundraise.unhcr.ca

Pedalling toward purpose

A 1,600-kilometre pilgrimage led
Tarek Riman on a journey of self-discovery—
and path forward in support of refugees

By Lauren La Rose





Tarek Riman is seen at Cruz de Ferro, Santa Colomba de Somoza, Province of Leon, Spain on April 5, 2016. The stop was part of his bicycle pilgrimage of the Camino de Santiago documented in his new book *The Camino Within*.

Working with a digital marketing agency, **Tarek Riman** was on track with his professional life—yet everything else seemed off-course.

“I didn’t feel my life was fully aligned on where I wanted to go. I decided to sell everything that I have, get rid of everything... and just leave.”

With bicycle in tow, he headed to France to embark on an epic pilgrimage of the Camino de Santiago, a historic long-distance trail extending across the Spanish countryside. He completed the trek in 2016 and 2017, spanning 1,600 kilometres in total. Riman documented his journey in his new book *The Camino Within*.

Riman described his experience as both “liberating” and “transformational.” He recalled the warmth and generosity demonstrated to him, such as those who offered him food and water along the way.

“What makes us human is helping each other and that’s pretty much what inspired me to help as much as I can,” said Riman, founder of Cap.TaiM, a full-service digital marketing agency, and MontrealTips.com, a blog supporting ideas, entrepreneurs, startups, businesses, causes and local talent.

Proceeds from the first 200 copies sold of *The Camino Within* will go to UNHCR. The Lebanese-born Riman said he feels a deep connection to the plight of refugees, relating personally to the struggle for survival and safety.

“I realized that I had a choice to leave. I had a choice to leave everything behind,” Riman said of his pilgrimage. “But a lot of refugees, they don’t have a choice to leave their homes. They don’t have the choice not to travel thousands of kilometres and suffer.”

Riman said he was motivated to donate to UNHCR because of what he regards as the “high transparency” of the organization.

“I know the high level of authenticity UNHCR has: that’s what puts me at comfort,” he said. “That’s what opens the door at the end of the day—that trust.”

The one thing I think refugees have when they leave where they are is their faith. Their faith in a better life, their faith in creating a new life and a safer life for their kids, and their faith is in us, their fellow humans and their goodwill to help them.” **R**

Tarek Riman



Follow the path paved by Tarek and so many of our other incredible supporters. Visit fundraise.unhcr.ca



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Empowerment through education

Morneau Shepell team sees their investment in action at secondary school for refugee girls

Heather Kaufman, Vice-President, National Partnerships at Morneau Shepell (centre) visits with students at Morneau Shepell Secondary School for Girls at Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya.

“Before I got to the Kakuma Refugee Camp, I really didn’t know what to expect from the experience,” says Carey Green, Senior Director, Account Management at Morneau Shepell. She was part of a contingent from Morneau Shepell that visited the camp in Kenya last spring. While there, they saw first-hand the impact of their long-term investment in secondary education for refugee girls.

There are approximately 350 students enrolled at the Morneau Shepell Secondary School for Girls, which opened in 2014.

Since partnering with UNHCR Canada in 2011, Morneau Shepell has remained UNHCR Canada’s largest corporate supporter. The company has sustained its financial commitment to help make secondary education a reality for a steadily growing number of refugee girls.

“Visiting the Morneau Shepell Secondary School for Girls was inspiring,” says Green. “This was a place that allowed the girls to do more than just hope: these girls believe in

themselves and in the possibility of a better future for them and their families.”

Joining Green was Heather Kaufman, Vice-President, National Partnerships. She recalls the excitement of her first glimpse of the camp from the air, followed by the warm welcome from UNHCR staff and regional state representatives on the ground.

“From the moment we pulled up to the school we could see that as much as we were excited to be there, the girls were equally as excited to see us,” Kaufman says. “The next many hours were spent learning how the girls spent their days, how valued their education was to them, how proud each girl was of her country of origin and the gratitude they felt for their safe learning environment.

“I felt immensely proud to be a small part of the exceptional work Morneau Shepell and the UNHCR does at the Kakuma Refugee Camp.” **R**

Headquartered in Toronto, Morneau Shepell is a leading North American human resources consulting and technology company with global reach, and also UNHCR Canada’s largest corporate partner.
We are grateful to Morneau Shepell and all of our Canadian private sector partners whose vital contributions help protect and empower displaced people today and for the future.



Want to join us in making a world of difference for refugees?

Please visit: unhcr.ca/partners or contact [Tara Graham, grahamt@unhcr.org](mailto:grahamt@unhcr.org)

Gifts that give back

We are privileged to have access to health care services, warm clothes and a safe place to sleep. Millions of refugees and displaced people aren't as fortunate.

You can give a gift that gives back and offers life-saving aid to refugees when they need it most.



Give security | \$25

Protection from chilly conditions is essential as the temperatures dip. You can help provide a family with blankets and mats, so they won't have to sleep on the cold ground.



Give safety | \$100

A new mother's bundle contains essential supplies like nutrition supplements, blankets, and baby clothes to keep mom and baby warm and healthy. Help dramatically improve the chances of survival for new moms and their little ones.



Give shelter | \$400

Harsh winter conditions make life even more challenging for refugees, many of whom have been forced to flee home with nothing. A winterization kit provides a family with warm blankets, heaters, tarps, a stove, sleeping mats and much more for survival against the elements.

Visit shop.unhcr.ca



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