

Oral Statement by the Home Secretary on Syrian Refugees

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Mr Speaker, with permission I would like to make a statement regarding the Government's proposal to relocate some of the most vulnerable refugees who have fled the conflict in Syria.

I'm sure the whole House will join me in deploring the appalling scenes of violence and suffering which we have witnessed in Syria.

More than 100,000 people have been killed and the credible reports of systematic use of torture and starvation are simply sickening. Millions of innocent people have fled their homes. There are now more than 11 million Syrians in desperate need, including 6 and a half million people displaced inside Syria and more than 2.3 million refugees in neighbouring countries – at least half of them children.

The numbers are staggering and the scale of the crisis is immense. The Prime Minister has rightly called it the greatest refugee crisis of our time.

The greatest contribution we can make is to work to end the conflict altogether, using UK diplomacy and our international influence to support the negotiations taking place in Geneva at this moment. That is precisely what we are doing. Our goal is a peaceful settlement that enables a political transition and an end to the violence in Syria. That is the only way to create the conditions for all Syrian refugees to do what they most want to do: return to their homes and livelihoods in peace.

We are also leading the world in responding to the humanitarian disaster: Britain is the second largest bilateral donor in the world after the United States. We have provided £600 million for the Syrian relief effort so far, of which £500 million has already been allocated to support refugees and the internally displaced. And we are helping Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Turkey support those who have sought refuge there.

As a result of our assistance 320,000 people a month are being given food, 900,000 a month have drinking water, and we have enabled almost 316, 000 medical consultations to take place.

This is the UK's largest ever response to a humanitarian crisis, and it comes on top of our efforts to secure humanitarian access inside Syria and to provide essential materials such as shelter, blankets and stoves to help vulnerable Syrians to survive the winter.

Mr Speaker, the greatest need is in the region and it is there that the United Kingdom can make the largest impact. As the Prime Minister made clear last week, our country has a proud tradition of providing protection to those in need, and where there are particularly difficult cases of vulnerable refugees who are at grave risk, we are ready to look at those cases.

Following consultations with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugee's office in London in recent days, I can tell the House that the Government will be launching a new programme to provide emergency sanctuary in the UK for displaced Syrians who are particularly vulnerable.

This programme – the Vulnerable Person Relocation scheme – will be based on three principles.

First, we are determined to ensure that our assistance is targeted where it can have the most impact on the refugees at greatest risk. The programme will focus on individual cases where evacuation from the region is the only option. In particular we will prioritise help for survivors of torture and violence, and women and children at risk or in need of medical care who are recommended to us for relocation by UNHCR. This is where we believe we can make a distinctive contribution as the United Kingdom.

For example, some of the worst abuses in the Syrian conflict involve the use of sexual violence, including in regime detention centres. The UK's Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative is working to end these crimes globally. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office has deployed teams of experts to train Syrians to document and investigate crimes of sexual violence and enable future prosecutions. And the Department for International Development is prioritising the protection of women and girls, including providing

clinical care for 12,000 Syrian refugee survivors of sexual and gender based violence in Jordan. Looking at examples such as these through our relocation scheme, without excluding any others, will help promote our wider goal of ending warzone sexual violence, and is an approach co-ordinated across the whole of government.

Second, the scheme will be run in addition to the two resettlement programmes the Home Office currently operates in partnership with the UNHCR: the Gateway programme which settles 750 refugees from a small number of targeted locations every year, and the Mandate Resettlement Scheme, which is designed to resettle individual refugees who have been recognised as refugees by UNHCR, and have a close family member in the UK who is willing to accommodate them. It will also be in addition to the asylum claims which we have been considering – and will continue to consider – under our normal rules. Since the crisis began we have taken in nearly 3,500 Syrian asylum seekers – the fourth highest in the EU – with 1,100 Syrian nationals recognised as refugees in the year to September 2013.

Third, because we want to focus our assistance on the most vulnerable people, we do not intend to subscribe to a quota scheme. I want to make clear to the House, therefore, that this programme will run in parallel with the UNHCR's own Syria Humanitarian Admission Programme (HAP), and we will work in close consultation with UNHCR offices in London, in Geneva and in the region.

The United Kingdom has a deep and strong working relationship with UNHCR built up over many years. £61 million of UK humanitarian assistance to Syria is being delivered through UNHCR programmes. Our approach is entirely consistent with the wider UNHCR programme, is supported by them and will allow us the control to make best use of our capability to help these cases.

Mr Speaker, this House and our whole country can be proud of the role we are playing in supporting the Syrian people at a time of great crisis. British money is helping to provide food, water and shelter to hundreds of thousands of displaced Syrians every day. We are granting asylum to those who need it, consistent with this country's proud tradition of giving help to those who need it most. And through the relocation scheme I have announced today we will be providing emergency sanctuary to people who are most at risk, including victims of torture and violence.

But the only way for the violence and suffering to end is with a negotiated political transition, and the Government will spare no effort in working to find a peaceful solution to the crisis that will allow refugees to return home.

I commend this statement to the House.

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