

Refugee Council USA

Refugee Council USA (RCUSA), a coalition of 20 U.S.-based non-governmental organizations dedicated to refugee protection, welcome, and excellence in the U.S. refugee resettlement program, commends the Obama Administration for coordinating the Leaders' Summit on Refugees that will take place on September 20, 2016.

The Leaders' Summit, as well as the UN General Assembly Summit on Large Movements of Migrants and Refugees on September 19th, are both critical opportunities for the U.S. and other members of the global community to show collective leadership by taking concrete steps to address the tremendous refugee protection needs that exist around the world, including right here in the Americas. This leadership must be demonstrated through concrete new commitments to expand and strengthen humanitarian assistance to refugees and the host countries carrying a disproportionate responsibility for them. But leadership also means demonstrating a resounding rejection of xenophobic and racist rhetoric that increasingly dominates global discourse around refugees today.

The United States should champion the rights of refugees to cross borders to seek protection and asylum. Therefore, in addition to urging the states surrounding Syria to stop blocking refugees from crossing to safety and escaping their country, the United States should also demonstrate leadership at home in terms of its response to Central American refugees, most of them children and families, seeking asylum along its own southern border.

In order for the United States to truly lead by example, it must recognize the forced displacement of people from the Northern Triangle as the refugee crisis it truly is and respond accordingly. If we do not, the United States runs the great risk of losing authority as a refugee protection leader as countries in Europe, Asia and Africa follow how we respond to the refugee emergency in our own region.

RCUSA supports the United States' diligent efforts to resettle 85,000 refugees in FY16, but given our leadership position and the extent of the global refugee crisis, RCUSA encourages the Administration to do much more. In advance of the UN General Assembly Summit on Large Movements of Migrants and Refugees, we support the UN Secretary General's stated goal of governments collectively admitting 10% of the world's refugees each year, and we expect the U.S. will participate generously and responsibly in welcoming our fair share of refugees. Our country is better because of our proud history of refugee resettlement. When we welcome innocent people who have fled their homes in order to save their lives and start over in safety and freedom, we are also strengthening our local communities and making our country stronger. Resettling more refugees as the world experiences the highest number of refugees since World War II is fundamental to who we are as Americans and places us on the right side of history.

At the same time, for the vast majority of refugees who will never be resettled, the lack of education and work opportunities in host countries are of paramount concern. RCUSA agrees that education is a life-saving intervention and applauds the Obama Administration for its efforts to address access to education for refugees by mobilizing support for an increase in school enrollment by one million. As part of this effort, the Administration must address barriers to enrollment as refugees and other forcibly displaced persons have the right to safe and inclusive access to quality education, starting from early childhood. Furthermore, while signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention have agreed that refugees should have legal work opportunities, the reality for most refugees is starkly different. Refugees who are unable to legally work live in desperation and dependence, sometimes leading to the high levels of onward migration we are now witnessing, instead of being able to support their families and live self-sufficiently.

As the Administration urges other countries to increase humanitarian funding by thirty percent, double refugee admissions, and improve access to education and work opportunities, RCUSA recommends that the United States make the following commitments during the September 20th Summit:

Resettlement:

- The U.S. should commit to provide protection to 200,000 refugees through admission to the United States in FY17 through a combination of traditional refugee resettlement and additional legal, proven and secure approaches. At least 140,000 of these refugees should be resettled through the existing U.S. refugee resettlement program, with the necessary support for receiving and integrating them in American communities. To do any less would represent a U.S. commitment that falls short of the call made by the White House for a collective doubling of resettlement commitments in advance of the Summits.
- The United States should also ensure that there is a commensurate increase in the social services and integration support that are available to refugees as they start their new lives in this country.
- In addition to higher numbers, the U.S. should also demonstrate a commitment to a more equitable distribution of resettlement opportunities, ensuring that refugees in desperate circumstances everywhere have a chance of accessing this life-saving program.

Education:

The United States should pledge new financial support, while also mobilizing other countries to do the same, in support of delivering education opportunities alongside other essential protection and social services, both in emergency and protracted refugee contexts.

Employment:

The United States should work with refugee-hosting countries and other international actors to invest substantially more in assisting and incentivizing host countries to integrate refugee adults into their workforces to help countries make work rights a reality in both policy and practice.