**Briefing note: Extension needed to 30 day entry limit on visas for refugee family reunion**

**Introduction**

**We are asking that UK entry visas granted to the families of refugees living in the UK to all Briefing note: Extension needed to 30 day entry limit on visas for refugee family reunion**

**ow them to exercise their right to family reunion are made valid for 6 months rather than the current 30 days.**

**About Together Now**

Together Now is a small charity run entirely by volunteers. We provide support to refugees in the UK including helping fund travel to reunite them with their families - as is their right under the law. As our charity is small, we are able to move quickly to fund and organise travel on short notice when necessary.

This briefing sets out the problems we have encountered with the 30 day UK entry visas granted for family members joining refugees and the action the Government could take to improve the rules for family reunion. We’ve also provided a real scenario written by one of our clients and the challenges he encountered with his wife and son being issued a 30 day entry visa.

**Problems with the immigration rules for refugee family reunion**

Currently when individuals are granted refugee status in the UK they can apply to sponsor their dependent family members to join them in the UK. Once the application is approved the family are granted 30 day entry visas to travel to the UK. They right to stay in the UK is linked to their sponsor’s refugee status.

In our experience the rules dictating the length of entry visas cause huge problems for refugees living in the UK trying to be reunited with their loved ones.

The tight time restriction on the visa is an issue for vulnerable refugees because:

* Refugees don’t have money for travel readily available.

 Many refugees don’t have the hundreds of pounds ready to fund travel for family members. Our client ‘Eraivan’, a Tamil who fled Sri Lanka after being tortured by the authorities, didn’t have enough money to fund travel for his wife and two children after obtaining the 30 day visa, as they had spent all their savings on travelling to and from Columbo for appointments with the visa office. The cost of the flights for the family was over £1600 and additional funds were needed to get them to and from the airport safely. Refugees and torture survivors in particular don’t have networks of friends and relatives that allow them to easily borrow money. Without Together Now, they would not have been able to be reunited. Read more about ‘Eraivan’ [here](http://togethernow.org.uk/?p=761).

* Making travel arrangement is not always straightforward.

For many families, they are still living in a war zone, sometimes in hiding - it’s not easy to simply jump on the next flight. Thirty days sometimes isn’t enough time for the UK refugee to gather together the funds for travel and allow their family to get safely to an airport for travel. This was the case for our Syrian client’s wife ‘Noura’ - because of the time limit of thirty days to the visa, she had only a week to travel from Syria to Beirut, the closest operating airport. She only just managed the journey over land, which she made alone. Read more about ‘Noura’ [here](http://togethernow.org.uk/?p=757).

* Other documentation for travel can take than 30 days to obtain.
This was the case for our client ‘Gulnar’. She had been separated from her two children for three years - after getting 30 day visas for them, she found out that Pakistan needed documentation for them to leave the country which took eight weeks to process. This delayed the family’s reunion, leaving the 11 and 12 year olds living in Pakistan without their mother for six months until a new visa could be obtained. Read more about ‘Gulnar’ [here](http://togethernow.org.uk/?p=783).

The tight time restrictions on the visas are an issue for us because:

* It raises our costs unnecessarily

On average we pay £450 per person traveling. When we only have a short time period to book in this often ends up being more – sometimes double. As a small organisation this has a serious impact on how many families we are able to help.

* It puts clients at unnecessary risk

Our clients’ families are often themselves leaving unsafe or uncertain circumstances and them coming to the UK is important in keeping them safe. The risks of making the trip are far outweighed by the benefits. Despite this it is a risky journey and having to rush arrangements or people travelling on their ‘last chance’ (the day before their visa expires) reduces our options and ability to help them make the safest choices about their travel.

We also believe that this system results in families being forced to reapply unnecessarily creating additional work and expense for the Home Office.

**For these above reasons, we believe the length of visas granted for family reunion should be extended to 6 months or up until the expiration of the refugee status of the sponsor if this is shorter**. This would give refugees a better chance to find the money for travel for their families, and would also give their families more time to travel to the UK safely.

If this proposal is not acceptable we would like to understand the reasons behind this and investigate other options for extension being made available.

**An example of the challenges 30 day visas present: ‘Abebe’, a Together Now client**

*Abebe’s story is typical of many of our clients. He is working and was able to fund two thirds of his family’s flight cost himself. Less than £300 stood between him and losing his family’s visas. Abebe’s job is working with refugees and asylum seekers and he’s aware that in some ways he was lucky compared to others when it came to family reunion. He still faces some challenges; getting his son into school and being able to get appropriate accommodation for his family.*

I was separated from my family for 12 years. I left my country in September 2004 and exactly 12 years later I am reunited with my son and wife.

I had tried to keep in touch with them more or less when they were in Ethiopia. The internet connection is very weak down there so I was not able to use Viber and free calling methods with ease. Living as a refugee is very tough especially if one has close family back home. Nothing can fill that emptiness that comes from being apart from your family.

Your assistance has come at the right time and I am deeply grateful for it. It would give more time to arrange for the air ticket if the validity of the visa was at least 60 days. When we got the visa we had 25 days and it took 15 days for another charity to tell us they couldn’t provide assistance.

Almost all refugees find it hard to cover the cost of the air ticket especially those with large families. It can be seen from my experience that there is no one to rely on and it would give more time for us to look into options if the visa was longer. It is unimaginable to lose a visa for lack of transport money.

At last with the assistance of you and other friends I was able to buy the tickets.

My wife and son are fine and well. They always dreamed of a day where we would be reunited. My son is a good age to complete his secondary education. Life back home is difficult especially for single mothers and so it was hard for my wife to raise our son alone.

We have a lot to catch up on in each other’s life, especially for my son who I left when he was three years old hoping everything would be fine.