



**“WE ARE NOT SAFE HERE”**

REFUGEES UNDER ATTACK IN SRI LANKA  
AND THE NEED FOR RESETTLEMENT

AMNESTY  
INTERNATIONAL





# INTRODUCTION

***“I saved my life from a terrible situation where both my wife and I were threatened with execution. I worked in difficult circumstances but stayed in my country. I had to flee to save the life of my 5 year old daughter. I do not deserve to face intimidation and attack once again”***

“Ali”<sup>1</sup>, Shi’a Hazara Afghan, Male, Negombo Police Station

On 21 April 2019, a group of bombers attacked three churches and three hotels in Sri Lanka, claiming the lives of more than 250 people in the deadliest violence the country has seen since the end of the internal conflict in 2009. Most of the victims were members of Sri Lanka’s Catholic community, who were sitting in prayer on Easter Sunday. One of the churches that was attacked was St. Sebastian’s in Negombo, a city on Sri Lanka’s west coast.

More than 100 people were killed in the attack on St. Sebastian’s church. In the days after the attacks, mobs took to the streets of Negombo, targeting refugees and asylum-seekers from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran in reprisal attacks. They were subject to physical attacks, intimidation, threats and were forcibly evicted from their homes, leaving them to seek sanctuary at police stations and community centres.

***“We need a place to stay where we are safe and free. We are not safe here.”***

“Hifza”<sup>2</sup>, Pakistani Shi’a, female

Beginning on 22 April 2019, mobs of young and sometimes armed men began going door to door in the Negombo area, looking to evict refugees and asylum-seekers originally from Muslim-majority countries. Up to this point, refugees and asylum-seekers said they had lived peacefully in the area, only ever encountering occasional hostility.

“There was a group of men who came, some of them carrying sticks with nails in them. Some of them were drunk,” Naseem John, 57, a Pakistani Catholic from Karachi, told Amnesty International. “They said that we were Pakistanis and that we had to leave the area within two hours. We said that we are also Catholics, like the victims killed in the church. They said, ‘It doesn’t matter, you’re still Pakistani. You have to leave.’”

Refugees and asylum-seekers from Afghanistan and Pakistan told Amnesty International that, in several cases, their landlords intervened and pleaded with the mobs not to attack their tenants, and then helped their tenants to leave. Some Ahmadi Muslim women said that they had to leave in a sudden panic and, out of fear, they were not even able to take their scarves and other religious clothing with them.

Sri Lanka is currently home to approximately 1,600 refugees and asylum-seekers, who have come to the country to register themselves with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and seek third country resettlement. Between 2015 and

1 Pseudonym used to protect the identity of the refugee

2 Pseudonym used to protect the identity of the refugee



2018, 492 people were resettled from Sri Lanka – with most of them accepted by the United States of America and by Canada.<sup>3</sup> The countries of origin for refugees and asylum-seekers include Afghanistan, Iran, Myanmar and Pakistan.

Many belong to religious or ethnic minority groups that have faced persecution. In the case of Shi'a Hazaras from Pakistan and Afghanistan, they have been targeted for both their ethnicity and religious background. They arrived with few possessions, sometimes just the clothes they wore for the journey. Many of them have found rented accommodation in various parts of Sri Lanka as they await a decision on their asylum claims.

On several occasions, they faced threats of deportation. In 2014, for example, a “special operation” was initiated to arrest and deport refugees and asylum seekers, in a move that the United Nations’ refugee agency denounced as a violation of international law. In all, 183 people were forcibly returned to Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In September 2017, a group of Rohingya refugees from Myanmar, who had fled crimes against humanity committed there by the Myanmar military, were attacked in a safe house maintained by UNHCR. The refugees were mostly women and children, including several infants. The attackers publicized their assault on social media. Eventually, the refugees were shifted to a high security detention facility in the south of Sri Lanka, supposedly for their own safety.

**“People [displaced Ahmadi refugees and asylum-seekers] are hopeless now, continuously worrying and questioning their future and what would become of them.”**

Mavra, Pakistani Ahmadi, female

3 UNHCR, Resettlement Data Finder, <https://rsq.unhcr.org/en/#Qj6J>

The refugees in Sri Lanka have had their lives overturned twice now. They first had to flee persecution in their countries of origin and now, after the Easter Sunday attacks, they were forced to leave their homes and seek refuge in temporary and makeshift shelters, where they fear for their safety and live in appalling conditions. Both times, they were targeted for their religious, ethnic or national identities.

The international community can do more to help these refugees. In cases, where countries are resettling refugees currently in Sri Lanka, those processes can be accelerated.

Many countries that can increase the numbers of refugees from Sri Lanka they are resettling. And other countries can step forward and share the responsibility, ending the uncertainty and giving the refugees the security they have long waited for and deserve.

***“We fled from persecution, discrimination and insecurity that we are facing again. I am now exposed to the same situation here. I hope to witness a day when the situation improves and we can enjoy freedoms and safety once again”***

Musa<sup>\*4</sup>, Shi’a Hazara Afghan, male



4 Pseudonym used to protect the identity of the refugee

# THE PERSECUTION OF AFGHANISTAN AND PAKISTAN'S RELIGIOUS MINORITIES

## AHMADI MUSLIMS FROM PAKISTAN

Ahmadi Muslims were declared non-Muslim in a constitutional amendment in 1974. A decade later, a presidential ordinance entrenched discrimination against Ahmadi Muslims by amending the penal code to criminalize the community's religious practices.

Transgressions are punished by heavy fines or up to three years' imprisonment. Members of the Ahmadi community have also been ensnared by Pakistan's blasphemy laws, with more than 500 Ahmadis charged with "blasphemy" since 1987.

The Ahmadi Muslim community has also been subject to violent attacks, including the massacre of more than 90 Ahmadis in armed assaults on two mosques in Lahore. Members of the Ahmadi community have been assassinated, Ahmadi graveyards have been desecrated,

and Ahmadi shops have been attacked. Ahmadis are also the object of hate sermons – including on television - that incite violence against community, whipping up mobs by declaring Ahmadis "wajib-ul-qatl", or "liable to be killed."

## CHRISTIANS FROM PAKISTAN

Christians in Pakistan face systemic discrimination and in recent years have been subjected to rising intolerance and armed attacks. In December 2017, nine people were killed in an attack on a church in Lahore. The year before, a Lahore playground was attacked on Easter Sunday, killing 70.

Since the emergence of the hard line Tehreek-e-Labbayk Pakistan (TLP), the danger to Christians has intensified. Through violent protests and death threats, the TLP has used Pakistan's controversial blasphemy laws to systematically target Christians and other minorities. This was exemplified by their reaction to the Supreme Court's acquittal of Asia Bibi, a Christian woman who had

been sentenced to death on false blasphemy charges. The TLP laid siege to major cities for days, blocking motorways, torching cars, buses and buildings, threatening to kill her.

The UNHCR recognizes that widespread impunity is utilized not only for targeting of Christians by mobs, but also by individuals to settle personal and business

disputes. In 2014, a Christian couple was dragged out of their home because of a vague and baseless allegation of blasphemy and violently beaten by a mob in broad daylight, before they were burnt alive in a brick oven. All they had done was ask for their wages from the brick kiln owner who they worked for.



***“By hundred percent we will be arrested at the airport. By hundred percent no one could find about our fate as nothing is clear that would happen to us- particularly my husband”***

Iranian refugee, female

## SHI'A HAZARAS FROM AFGHANISTAN

The Hazaras predominately are followers of the Shi'a sect of Islam, in a country where the majority follow the Sunni sect – making them a minority both in terms of ethnicity and religion.

Shi'a Hazaras have been frequently targeted by the Taliban (who declared the Hazaras non-Muslim when they were in power from 1996-2001), Al-Qaeda and the so-called Islamic State.

In March 2019, a mortar attack targeted a Shi'a gathering killing eleven people and wounded over ninety people, again in the same neighborhood of Dasht-e-Barchi in the west of Kabul. In September

2018, 20 people were killed and over 70 injured when a suicide attacker followed by a car bomb, targeted a wrestling club in the west of Kabul which was home to many Hazaras.

## SHI'AS FROM PAKISTAN

Pakistani Shi'as have been targeted for years by armed sectarian groups such as the Sipah-e-Sahaba and its even more violent offshoot, Lashkar-e-Jhangvi.

Since 2007, other armed groups such as the Pakistani Taliban and al-Qaeda have targeted them in bombings across the country, bombing Shi'a processions, mosques and killing individuals of Shi'a backgrounds.

The UNHCR stated that attacks on Shi'as in Pakistan “increased exponentially” between 2012 and 2015. In 2012, more than 400 Shi'as were killed in different parts of the country. In 2019, at

least 16 people were killed and several more wounded when an open-air marketplace in a Hazara neighbourhood was bombed.

## REFUGEES FROM IRAN

While Iran is home to many refugees from Afghanistan, it has its own share of asylum seekers who have fled violence and targeted attacks on political dissidents.

In January 2019, Amnesty International called on Iran to reverse its “year of shame” when 7,000 people were arrested for exercising their right to freedom of expression, association and peaceful assembly.

Of these, 26 people were killed, others were flogged, while hundreds sentenced to prison terms. They were arrested for protesting authoritarianism, corruption and poverty. Those who have been targeted ranged from workers and

trade union activists, to women human rights defenders, journalists and even environmental rights activists and ethnic and religious minorities.

# WHAT IS RESETTLEMENT?

Resettlement is a process and international tool of protecting those refugees who are most at risk of harm in the country to which they have fled. During a resettlement process, countries that are safer agree to grant refugee status to the people meeting strict criteria. After which, they are supported to move to a different country. This ensures that the refugees are protected against refoulement and have access to civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights in the country of resettlement.

## **Refugees who have fled their home countries generally have three durable solutions:**

- a. Voluntary repatriation to their countries of origin, if the situation has significantly improved or is no longer unsafe for the reasons they fled.
- b. Local integration in the host country, where the host country accepts them as refugees or grants citizenship.
- c. Resettlement to another country, especially when conditions in host countries are unsafe and refugees face risk of harm or violence.

## **Put very simply, this is how it works:**

When people are forced to flee their homes, they search for safety in another country. Once they reach there, they register as asylum-seekers and wait to be recognized as refugees by the UN's refugee agency, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), or by the local authorities. During this anxious wait, some people can face threats, intimidation, harassment, and even violence.

UNHCR will assess their "vulnerability criteria" and whether they urgently need protection in a different country. That's called resettlement. If a person qualifies, the wait can be long – often years. But solutions like resettlement offer hope to people who have lost everything, leaving behind loved ones, property, and much else.

Resettlement allows people to rebuild their lives – to gain an education, to access decent healthcare, to find a place that is safe for them and their families, to be able to practice their religion and beliefs freely, and enjoy all other human rights they weren't able to in their countries.

## **As per UNHCR's mandate, refugees meet the criteria of resettlement if they:**

- 1** survived torture or serious violence.
- 2** have medical needs, such as a serious illness or long-term health conditions.
- 3** are a women or girl at risk of abuse or exploitation.
- 4** are a child or teenager on their own.
- 5** face persecution because of their gender or sexual orientation.
- 6** need legal or physical protection—for example, because they face being deported to a country where they could be tortured or killed.
- 7** have been on the move for a long time and lack foreseeable durable solutions.
- 8** require family reunification when resettlement is the only way to reunite with their family members separated by borders or continents.

# WHO IS A REFUGEE?

A refugee is a person who has fled their own country because they are at risk of persecution there. The risks to their safety and life were so great that they felt they had no choice but to leave and seek safety outside their country because their own government cannot or will not protect them from those dangers. Refugees have a right to international protection.



# WHO IS AN ASYLUM-SEEKER?

An asylum-seeker is a person who has left their country and is seeking protection from persecution and serious human rights violations in another country, but who hasn't yet been legally recognized as a refugee and is waiting to receive a decision on their asylum claim. Seeking asylum is a human right. This means everyone should be allowed to enter another country to seek asylum.

## Why should governments welcome refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants?

- We want to live in a world where people who are in grave danger have the opportunity to rebuild their lives in safety.
- In a globalized world, sharing global responsibility for global issues is the fair thing to do.
- Host communities benefit from the tremendous energy and drive to start new lives, which these people bring.
- Welcoming people from other countries strengthens host communities by making them more diverse and flexible in our fast-changing world.
- Some of the most inspiring and influential people in the arts, science, politics and technology have been refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants. They were allowed to rebuild their lives in a new country and they thrived as members of a new community.
- Governments should never force anyone to go back to a country where they are at risk of human rights violations. Instead, refugees should be offered a safe place to live and opportunities to access work, education and health care.





# A RESPONSIBILITY TO SHARE RESPONSIBILITY



The top ten refugee-hosting countries in the world only have 2.5 per cent of global income among them. They are all either lower or middle-income countries. Turkey, for example, hosts nearly four million refugees. Jordan hosts 2.9 million refugees. Pakistan, Lebanon and Uganda each host around 1.4 million refugees. In Lebanon, that means that one in every four people is a refugee. Bangladesh, Iran and Sudan each host nearly a million refugees.

Europe, which has a fifth of the world's wealth, by contrast, only hosts 11 per cent of the world's refugees. The United States of America, which has a quarter of the world's wealth, hosts just one per cent of the world's refugees. The world's wealthiest countries have a duty to share this responsibility.

## LAWS FOR MIGRANTS, REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS

The rights of migrants, refugees and asylum-seekers are protected by international law, regardless of how and why they arrive in a country. They have the same rights as everyone else, plus special or specific protections including:

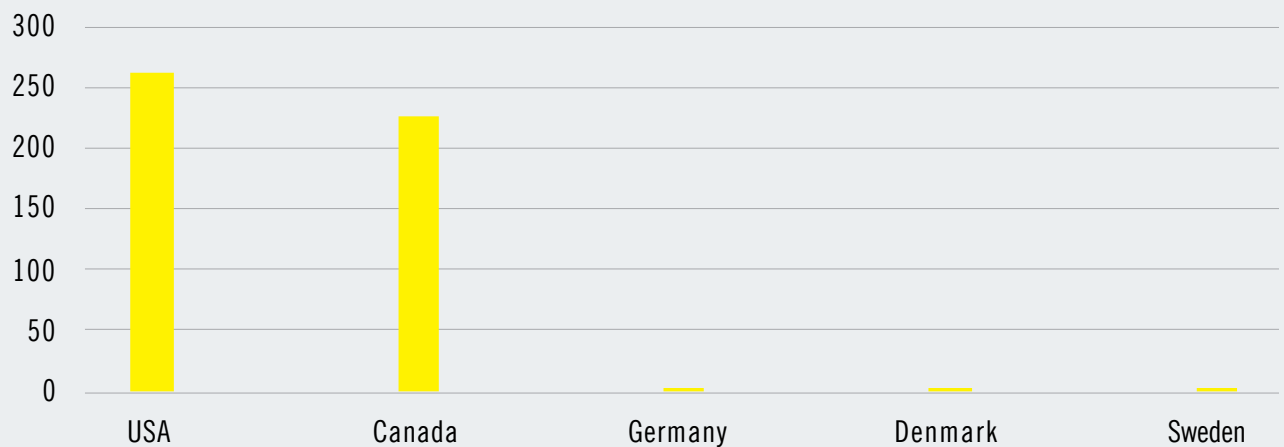
The [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) (Article 14), which states that everyone has the right to seek and enjoy asylum from persecution in other countries.

The 1951 [UN Refugee Convention](#) (and its 1967 Protocol), which protects refugees from being returned to countries where they risk being persecuted.

***“I came to Sri Lanka after my O-levels when I was 17. My parents and I have been here since 2013 and only given refugee status in 2018. We were rejected once, then appealed to get another chance at resettlement, but nothing is moving forward. I am 23 and could not continue my education after O-levels – it is impossible for me to even visualize my future here [in Sri Lanka]. How long do I have to wait?”***

Sana Saleem, Ahmadi Refugee

## REFUGEES RESETTLED TO THIRD COUNTRIES FROM SRI LANKA (2015-2019)



(Source: UNHCR)

## Number of Refugees resettled to third countries from Sri Lanka (2015-2019)

Source: UNHCR

Year	Country of Origin	Country of Resettlement	Number of persons
2015	Myanmar (MMR)	United States of America (USA)	87
2015	Afghanistan (AFG)	United States of America (USA)	2
2015	All others (All others)	Canada (CAN)	219
2015	All others (All others)	Germany (DEU)	3
2015	All others (All others)	Denmark (DNK)	3
2015	All others (All others)	United States of America (USA)	37
2015	Eritrea (ERI)	United States of America (USA)	2
2015	Iran (Islamic Rep. of) (IRN)	Canada (CAN)	2
2015	Iran (Islamic Rep. of) (IRN)	United States of America (USA)	2
2016	Iran (Islamic Rep. of) (IRN)	United States of America (USA)	5
2016	Afghanistan (AFG)	United States of America (USA)	96
2016	Iran (Islamic Rep. of) (IRN)	Sweden (SWE)	1
2017	Afghanistan (AFG)	Canada (CAN)	4
2017	Afghanistan (AFG)	United States of America (USA)	5
2018	Afghanistan (AFG)	United States of America (USA)	24
2019	Afghanistan (AFG)	United States of America (USA)	3
Total refugees resettled from Sri Lanka from 2015 to 2019			495



**Amnesty International** is a global movement of more than 7 million people who campaign for a world where human rights are enjoyed by all.

Our vision is for every person to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion and are funded mainly by our membership and public donations.

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