

# 'The Chance to Start from Scratch'

Transcript of Czech national radio broadcast, 30th March 2013



*These Bhutanese women meet every week in the Daily Care Center in the neighbourhood of Pitsmoor. Photo: [Daniela Vrbová](#)*

There are times in one's life when there is nothing else to do but to flee in order to save one's life. We are talking about refugees here. The UNHCR office (The United Nations' High Commissioner for Refugees) registered around 10.5 million refugees in 2011. The worldwide estimation is much bigger, though - around 43 million refugees and people that were forced to leave their homes because of war or persecution.

This number of course changed since the conflict in Syria broke out. More than one million have fled from the country since, and thousands more have left their homes within Syria.

People usually flee to the closest safe place, as close to their home as possible. Only a minor part makes it to the safe Europe – it's estimated that out of those 10.5 million, it's not even 20 per cent. Often, they only return to their homes after many years and sometimes never more – and the temporary stay in a refugee camp turns to be a lifetime.

According to UNHCR, the 10,000th child was born in the largest refugee camp – the Dadaab in Kenya – in January 2013.

22-year-old Fatuma was also born in Dadaab. Her family had fled there from Somalia. Today, though, Fatuma lives with her brother and the rest of her family in the British city of Sheffield. She works, takes care of older people and volunteers to assist other refugees that have found their new home in the UK.

How did this happen? Similarly to other people associated in the Gateway Refugee Communities Forum (an organisation of previously resettled refugees supported by the Refugee Council in the UK) that meet regularly in the Sheffield downtown, Fatuma's family was eligible in one or more of the seven categories that UNHCR sets for the refugees to be eligible to be resettled to safer countries.



*These Bhutanese women meet every week in the Daily Care Center in the neighbourhood of Pitsmoor. Photo: [Daniela Vrbová](#)*

„Resettlement is an important tool that enables burden and responsibility sharing,” explains Alexander de Chalus from the British office of UNHCR. “It is important to remember, though, that resettlement is only a complementary tool, not a substitution of standard asylum policy - that is, accepting people who spontaneously turn up at a country’s border.”

### **How do countries select refugees for resettlement?**

„It all starts with an interview,” Alexander de Chalus explains. “The refugee walks into a UNHCR office, registers himself or herself, and if they are eligible within the resettlement criteria then they go through an interview about being resettled. After this interview they fill in a form that is eventually sent to the receiving countries. The country then decides what kind of refugees and how many of them it might take, based on its own criteria. Either it decides finally who it will accept based only on the forms or it can carry out its own interviews. Normally, the UK government does personal interviews, but there are areas that have been quite dangerous these days – Syria, for example. That’s why we now have video interviews with our office in Damascus.”

In 2012, 26 countries including the Czech Republic have started resettlement programmes. Czech Republic has so far resettled 107 people from Myanmar. Czech Radio has been following the life paths of these resettled families for some years now.

„Our priority is to finish the placing of the seven families that arrived at the end of 2012, “ says Petr Novák from the Ministry of Interior, who supervises the resettlement programme. “Then we will think about further possibilities of the Czech Republic in this area, regarding mainly the finance.”

107 people are naturally a small number, compared to global needs, but significant for those concerned.

### **The Sheffield experience**

Let’s move to Great Britain now, to the city of Sheffield. It’s not a coincidence that we are here: the city has been resettling groups of refugees since 2004. Visitors from the Czech Republic must be especially impressed by the engagement and readiness of the Sheffield town hall to tackle the problems that these newcomers bring along – be it deliberately or

involuntarily. Belinda Gallup knows about all of them - she has been responsible for the resettlement programme in the city since 2004:

„I am not saying that we have developed the best model for the UK, or even for the whole of Europe. It works for us and we have been developing it according to our needs and our experience from other programmes. We are the 5<sup>th</sup> largest city in England – we have slightly over half a million people. And we are going to grow further. Because of the two universities in our city, we have many young people that eventually settle here and start their families. People also live longer. Even the number of people with foreign background has risen – since 2001 when the British government introduced the so-called 'dispersal programme' in order to spread asylum-seekers across the UK, so that they don't stick just in London and in the south-east. Sheffield joined the programme and since 2007 we have also been in the network of the so-called Cities of Sanctuary. That means we told ourselves we wanted to accept more asylum-seekers and refugees, and provide them welcome and with protection.”

It's also relevant to remark that Sheffield has always been rather left-wing and focused on social issues.

### **Through the eyes of the resettled**

Event though the attitude of Sheffield town hall is very kind and one can rely on a dense network of NGOs and volunteers, it does not, by any means, guarantee roses all the way in the new life of the refugee.

Ahmed, rather known as Adam among his colleagues and friends, came to UK in 2009 from Iraq. After having worked more or less secretly as interpreter for the British Army and US Air Force, the situation became far too dangerous for him in his own country.



*Adam (to the right) worked as interpreter for the British and American army in Iraq. Then the situation became far too dangerous for him. Photo: [Daniela Vrbová](#)*

„I started to work for the British Army in March 2005. To be honest with you, at first I considered the international forces in my country as an enemy. I did not understand why the war had to be started and I didn't believe the charges against Saddam Hussein. I thought the reason was rather the interest in our petrol. Then in 2004 I went to visit a friend of mine. We had to go through a checkpoint in the centre of Basra. The interpreter there was a Saudi and in my opinion, he didn't like Iraqis. He searched me through but did not respect certain things. We started to quarrel. Not knowing I could understand English he went back to the soldiers

and told them I might be a suicide bomber, that I might have this bomb belt. The soldiers came upon me and they tried to detain me. At this moment I started speaking English, saying the Saudi was lying and I insisted on speaking to the officer. The officer admitted I was right. It was at this moment that I realized, how many of such interpreters with the international forces there might be that are not interested in the Iraqi people?

**How was the work? It must have given you interesting opportunities and the salary could have been good as well?**

„Nobody believes me when I tell. My initial salary was 280 bucks, so not much. But when I started, it was shortly after the election and the British army was helping the Iraqi to build the country, the army, logistics and so on. If I hadn't worked as an interpreter, I would have felt I was missing something. I had to help my country anyway. The election was very important for us. I could not sit on the fence and do nothing.“

**Were you ever afraid that your friends and neighbors would condemn you for helping alien soldiers?**

„During the time I worked as interpreter with the international forces, 26 of my colleagues and friends were killed. Myself, I was three times a target of shooting and they tried to kidnap me when I was in a car. One of my friends told me: you better leave this, because you cannot survive shooting more than three times. I continued another 6 months and then started to look for another job. Maybe outside Iraq, perhaps in Europe. But I didn't find anything, so I came back to Iraq and to the interpreter job. This time for the US Air Force.“

**But now we are sitting on a bench in Sheffield, so eventually, you did leave Iraq – why?**

„It wasn't just about me – I have a wife. And she got depression and we were on the verge of getting divorced. So it wasn't my own life that I feared so much about, but I had to think about my family. So we came here. Later, also the Iraqi government started following the interpreters because they thought they were spies.“

**How do you find the life in Britain? Are you satisfied here?**

„The best thing that happened to me here in Britain was that our daughter was born – after 11 years of waiting. Otherwise I don't feel quite comfortable here, we have quite a lot of problems. I started to work – as a volunteer and then in a factory. I didn't want to be considered as somebody who just sits at home and receives social benefits. I worked for 3 years in that factory with embroidery machines. Then I got ill and the factory just sacked me. I feel as if I wasted my health in vain. Now I am not able to do any practical work. My wife had complications when giving birth – by an unskilled intervention the doctors damaged her bladder and my daughter's nerve in her face. Otherwise is life in Sheffield calm and organized, but we do experience both good and bad things here.“

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There are also question marks about whole groups of refugees. Such as those from Bhutan. Have you always thought that people from Bhutan were the happiest in the world?! Well, they may be, only they must not belong to ethnic minorities...

„They told us back then, that Bhutan was not our country because we were Nepalese. We had to leave Bhutan, otherwise they threatened to kill us. So we fled away because we were afraid. That was in the beginning of the 90's. Then we spent 20 years in a refugee camp in Nepal, “ one of the Bhutanese women says. These women meet every week in the Daily Care Center in

the Sheffield neighbourhood of Pitsmoor. They chat, play with the kids and teach knitting to one another. To meet and talk is the most important thing, though. The resettled refugees often suffer from social isolation: they have been resettled to a country whose culture they don't know, hardly have any contacts in and in the more developed countries, it's difficult for them to compete with the educated population in the labour market. The toughest barrier, though, is the language.

„It is difficult and we feel lonely here. Especially for my husband it is hard. He cannot go alone to the market that is held close to our home, because he would not be able to communicate there,” an elderly Bhutanese woman sighs. Yet, she thinks their current life is much better than their previous life in a refugee camp in Nepal.

To resettle groups and keep them together in the receiving countries, or to split them and spread them across the country, so that they have to integrate, is one of the big questions. In the Netherlands where there is also a large group of Bhutanese refugees that have been resettled there, the individual integration has often proven to be in contradiction with the mental comfort of the refugee. Annemiek Bots from the Dutch Council of Refugees explains:

„We have noticed that the Bhutanese have often very strong family ties. Much stronger than what we are used to in the Netherlands or in Europe. So having been distributed across the whole country, they have been suffering a lot and considered it as a negative thing. They felt lonely and missed family support. So this be our recommendation for the Dutch government: take these family bonds into account. Hand in hand goes also the refugee's ability to learn the Dutch language. It is a difficult language, especially for older people. But if they don't speak it, they may have problems finding a work and their integration into the society is minimal. Plus when their family is far away, it will only increase their feelings of isolation and loneliness.”

Czech Republic has also chosen to integrate resettled refugees individually. One of the reasons should be the possibilities of their accommodation. The Ministry of Interior addresses towns whether or not they would be willing to accept a refugee family. The town then has to provide an apartment owned by the town, and furnish it with basic equipment, so that the family has somewhere to eat, sleep and the children have a place to study. For half a year after the family has moved in, the town has to invest into special social care for the family. After this period of time, NGOs, local volunteers and church congregations step in. They help the family to integrate into the local society. Financially, their help can be covered from EU money, for example from the European Refugee Fond.

In return for having accepted a refugee family, the town receives a minor non-investment subsidy to improve the public infrastructure. “I don't suppose it's because of this subsidy that the towns do it, though,” Petr Novák from the Ministry of Interior says. “The purpose of this subsidy is rather to send a signal to the citizens of the town, that by receiving a refugee family, the place that they all live in will improve.”

The mayors of the receiving towns that we have addressed, have been very satisfied with the Burmese families so far. Nové Město na Moravě is accepting their third family this year, Černá Hora their second. In Havlíčkův Brod, they are going to accept their first Burmese family this year. According to the local mayor, Mr. Tecl, the city has decided so because of their previous positive experience with resettled refugees from Kazakhstan (Kazakhi Czechs, resettled in the 90's.). Also, they wanted to appreciate retrospectively how foreign countries

had been receiving Czech refugees before 1989. He said that they were looking forward to having a Burmese family in the city. A similar opinion comes from Kutna Hora; moreover, local mayor Mr. Ivo Šanc sees the presence of the family with a foreign background as enriching. According to him, the greatest challenge is going to be to find work for the family. The father will probably work in the City Technical Service (almost every city has this service organization, that takes care of the public space, such as cleaning the roads etc.), the mother may get work at a bakery.

No doubt is resettlement an act of solidarity and especially the second generation of resettled refugees gets their chance to start a decent life. Yet, resettlement is not a universal recipe and there are many moments when it can go wrong.

„I think the very first phase is very important, before the physical resettlement ever takes place,” Petr Novák says. “Refugees just want to get away. Anything outside the refugee camp is considered as a better option. Plus they have got idealized pictures of life in Europe, USA or Australia in their head.” So it’s here and now that as many pieces of relevant information about the receiving country is to be passed on them and they have to be prepared for the fact that not everything may be just splendid. “We tell them that they are going to live on a very tight budget, and that they may have to take unqualified jobs, even though they have some education,” he enumerates.

In June 2013, a group of municipality and Ministry of Interior representatives is going to visit Sheffield as part of the SHARE project. They are going to share and compare their experience with resettled refugees and get to know practices that may be transferable and suitable also for the Czech Republic. According to Petr Novák from the Ministry of Interior, one of these practices is the lurking potential of volunteers. In Western Europe, it may be a part of good note to spend a couple of hours a week or month volunteering: with children, elderly people or with refugees. “This potential is still asleep in the Czech Republic,” he says, “but I am an optimist.”

Resettlement is a chance for a new start, but a start from scratch: you have to forget your traumas, overcome your difficulties and show your utmost will and effort to move forward. Your reward may be a life – in safety and with a perspective. It’s not peanuts, but the price of these peanuts is very high.