



# POLICY & ADVOCACY REPORT

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## The Identity Barrier: Lack of Documentation Poses Challenges to Central African Refugees in the DRC

The new year in the Central African Republic (CAR) brought with it heightened insecurity that has continued to worsen over recent months. Though the civil war has been ongoing since 2012, new tensions sparked after incumbent president Faustin-Archange Touadéra was reelected for a second term on December 27, 2020.[1] Violence broke out in the aftermath of the election as a rebel coalition formed in response to the results, causing tens of thousands of people to flee into neighboring countries. As of May 31, 2021, there were 694,904 refugees from CAR, with a further 727,161 people internally displaced within the country.[2] On January 21, the government declared a state of emergency and curfew as part of a counterinsurgency that remain in place today.[3] The security situation remains unpredictable as sporadic bouts of violence continue, mostly in the rebel-held territories in Nord Ubangi Province along the border with the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC).[4]

The DRC hosts over 200,000 refugees from CAR.[5] The two countries have a long history of hosting each other's refugees along their shared 1,747-kilometer border. [6] Fleeing the most recent violence in CAR, many refugees have settled in makeshift camps along the DRC side of the Ubangi River, the majority of whom are women and children. Local authorities have recorded 92,053 new refugees from CAR since December 2020, with many reporting various human rights abuses occurring within the vulnerable communities.[7] The worsening security situation in both countries has cultivated an unsafe environment where already-vulnerable populations have little to no access to basic needs and social services.

Families fleeing to the DRC must make dangerous journeys across the river separating the border to reach remote sites near river arteries that often lack even basic shelter. They are dependent on the river for almost everything including food, drinking water, washing, and cooking, sharing scarce resources with local villagers.[8] Disease is rampant in these makeshift refugee sites, and there is virtually no access to health services or medical treatments. These conditions have also heightened the risk of sexual and gender-based violence for newly arrived women and girls, and there is a strong need for sanitation facilities to provide them with privacy and some separation from men while tending to their personal hygiene. Without proper healthcare facilities, the risk of Covid-19 infections remains high.

One of the most pervasive challenges that refugees in the DRC face is the systemic lack of documentation that creates barriers to accessing crucial services. In particular for Central African refugees, it is difficult for new arrivals to move further inland away from areas of increased violence without proper identification. Instead, they must remain in unsafe living conditions along the border in makeshift shelters that were not built by the government. Some of the targeted services provided by the government-funded refugee camps in safer areas include cash assistance programs, better access to schools and hospitals, solar lamps, mosquito nets, soap, tarps, and counseling services.[9]

In response to the recent influx of Central African refugees, the DRC asked the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) to implement a largescale verification and biometric registration system for new arrivals, to aid in identifying and targeting their specialized needs.[10] Before UNHCR began this initiative, there was no systematic process in the DRC to register new arrivals in the country and overall refugee response was severely underfunded. The new system has allowed the country to “relocate hundreds of refugees away from border areas to safer sites further inland where they can receive further humanitarian assistance.”[11] Most refugees coming into the DRC do not arrive with any identification documents, but the new registration system has allowed them to overcome the typical challenges associated with a lack of documentation.

The system rolled out by UNHCR was adopted in 2017 and is called Population Registration and Identity Management EcoSystem, or PRIMES. PRIMES uses more advanced information technology than the previous registration system, and has been implemented in 58 countries as of January 2019.[12] While UNHCR has engaged in refugee registration in the DRC in the past, the PRIMES system improves direct access by refugees to their personal data, entitlement information, and identity wallets.[13]

In contrast, UNHCR has not yet implemented the new system in neighboring Chad, where refugees from CAR have also been fleeing in high numbers since the start of the year. When refugees cross from CAR into Chad, they do not have anywhere safe to go. Instead of being met by aid workers who provide them with documentation to be able to settle in more secure camps, refugees in Chad often have “to resort to crossing back into CAR to find food or salvage what little is left from their properties.”[14] Without identification documents, they have no way of accessing humanitarian assistance such as food aid, farm equipment, and healthcare in Chad.

Under Article 27 of the Convention Related to the Status of Refugees, host countries have the responsibility to provide refugees with official documentation, including identification cards.[15] Refugee-hosting governments like Chad should follow the DRC’s lead and ask UNHCR to set up the PRIMES refugee registration system, to ensure that refugees everywhere are able to access both registration and the aid and benefits that go with it.

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# United States Issue Updates

## • **Garland Vacates Two Key Trump-Era Decisions on Asylum**

U.S. Attorney General Merrick Garland on June 16 vacated two immigration decisions from the Trump era that made seeking asylum more difficult. In the Matter of A-B-, former AG Jeff Sessions ruled against counting most victims of domestic or gang violence as a particular social group that is eligible for asylum. Garland wrote in his [decision](#) that the Sessions decision was too broad and “spawned confusion among the courts.” In the other case, Matter of L-E-A-, former AG William Barr held that a nuclear family does not qualify as a particular social group either. Garland [determined](#) that the decision, along with the Matter of A-B-, should be vacated so a rulemaking process and final rule can address the definition of a “particular social group.” Associate Attorney General Vanita Gupta wrote in a [memo](#) that the vacated orders “restricted the availability of asylum,” adding that the reversals will allow “these complex and important questions to be resolved with the benefit of full public comment.”

## • **Supreme Court Rules Against Permanent Status for Some TPS Recipients**

In a unanimous decision on June 7, the Supreme Court ruled that some immigrants with Temporary Protected Status are ineligible to apply to become permanent residents. An El Salvadorian citizen, who entered the United States illegally but later obtained Temporary Protected Status, challenged the denial of his application to become a lawful permanent resident. The court found that the TPS program gives foreign nationals nonimmigrant status, but it does not admit them into the country. Justice Elena Kagan noted that the decision does not affect immigrants with TPS who entered the country legally and then overstayed their visa. To read the ruling, [click here](#).

## • **Family Reunification Task Force Presents Initial Findings**

This month, a new interagency task force on the reunification of families separated at the southern border submitted its initial progress report. The task force said in its first 120 days it identified nearly all the children separated from their parents under the Trump administration’s Zero-Tolerance Policy and started reunifying parents and legal guardians with separated children. The task force said that it has identified 3,913 children so far who were separated from their families between July 2017 and the start of the Biden administration—of those, 2,127 children had not been reunified with their parents or legal guardians. Roughly 1,779 children were reunified with their parents prior to the task force. Working with the American Civil Liberties Union, the task force reunified seven families and is reuniting another 29 in the coming weeks. To read the task force announcement, [click here](#). To read the task force’s initial progress report, [click here](#).

## • **USCIS Makes Updates to Expedited Processing, Other Policies**

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) announced June 9 it had made updates to its policy manual. Officials said the updates would help eliminate unnecessary barriers in the legal immigration system and make improvements for people navigating the pathways to citizenship. The update gave further guidance on when expedited processing may be warranted. USCIS is rescinding a memo that allowed officers to deny some immigration benefit requests without first issuing a request for evidence or notice of intent to deny. The agency will also allow more time for some applicants to submit employment authorization documents. To read the announcement, [click here](#).

# United States Issue Updates (Cont'd)

## • Uniform Regulatory Agenda is Released for Proposed Rules

This month, the Biden administration released its updated Unified [Agenda](#) of Regulatory and Deregulatory Actions, which serves as a roadmap for the rules and actions that Biden administration agencies are planning.

## • ICE Ends Trump-Era Office Focused on Crime by Immigrants

Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) announced on June 11 it was terminating the Victim of Immigrant Crime Engagement or VOICE Office. VOICE was established during the Trump administration to assist the victims of crimes committed by undocumented immigrants. In its place, ICE is launching the Victims Engagement and Services Line, which is meant to aid victims regardless of the immigration status of the victim or perpetrator. Callers who dial the new telephone number will be directed to ICE's Detention Reporting and Information Line, Victim Information and Notification Exchange, and Victim Notification System Access. To read ICE's announcement, [click here](#).

## • U Visa Backlog Prompts Processing Changes

USCIS announced on June 14 it would change how it processes some requests for people seeking U-1 status. U visas are available to those who have been victims of crimes such as domestic violence or sexual assault. USCIS said it would provide employment authorization documents and deferrals for deportation to those with pending "bona fide" U visa petitions if they meet certain criteria. The agency cited "drastic increases" in the volume of U visa requests and a growing backlog in announcing the policy change. To read the policy alert, [click here](#).

## • State And DHS Expand Eligibility for Central American Minors Program

Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Secretary of Homeland Security Alejandro Mayorkas announced on June 15 that they were expanding access to the Central American Minors program to more people. The program allows certain children who are nationals of the Northern Triangle countries of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras, as well as some of their family members, to apply for refugee status and possible resettlement in the United States. The State Department [said](#) in March it was reopening the program, which was shuttered during the Trump administration. Officials said extending eligibility to legal guardians and U.S.-based parents who have pending asylum or U visa applications would "dramatically expand access" to the program. To read the announcement, [click here](#).

## • U Visa Backlog Prompts Processing Changes

Texas Governor Greg Abbott recently announced that the state's health and human services commission would no longer license 52 facilities that contract with the Office of Refugee Resettlement to house unaccompanied migrant children. In a June 17 letter, U.S. Health and Human Services Department Deputy General Counsel Paul Rodriguez wrote that the department was still evaluating the effects of the decision, adding the de-licensure of the facilities "could have immediate negative consequences for ORR's grantees operating in Texas." Rodriguez noted that it could hurt efforts to investigate allegations of child abuse or neglect and force child-care service providers to choose between working with the federal government or the Texas population. The letter included 25 questions for the state about how the de-licensure proclamation would be carried out.

# Around the World in International Migration

## • Food Crisis in Ethiopia's Tigray Region Worsens

Since fighting broke out in Ethiopia's Tigray region in November 2020, the conflict has quickly become one of the world's **worst** humanitarian crises. The Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) released a report on the worsening food crisis in the region. In total, 5.5 million people face acute food insecurity. According to the report, 350,000 people are already facing catastrophic conditions. The situation is expected to worsen, with over 400,000 people projected to face catastrophic conditions by September 2021. A key cause of food insecurity in the region is conflict, which has led to displacement, loss of livelihoods, and destruction of infrastructure.

## • UN Special Rapporteur Releases Report on Pushbacks Against Migrants

In the recently released "Report on Means to Address the Human Rights Impact of Pushbacks of Migrants on Land and at Sea", The UN Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights of Migrants Felipe González Morales aimed to examine means to overcome obstacles to the full and effective protection of human rights of migrants. The report outlines the increasing roadblocks and pushbacks faced by migrants around the world, including several European laws that disadvantage migrants, numerous incidents at the U.S.- Mexico border, in the waters around Australia, and several others. González concluded that, "pushbacks result in human rights violations incompatible with states' obligations under international human rights law, in **particular**, the prohibition of collective expulsion and refoulement." To read the full report, [click here](#).

## • Denmark Passes Law to Create Third-Country Asylum Processing Centers

Denmark has passed a law to relocate asylum seekers to a third country outside the European Union while their cases are being **reviewed**. The legislation seeks to partner countries to run migrant camps and fund agencies along migration routes. The law aims to discourage migration to Denmark by making it harder to be awarded asylum in the country. The European Commission is critical of the law and questioned if asylees have access to effective protections. This new law follows a wave of anti-immigrant measures passed by European nations in the past few years. In May of 2021, Denmark was the first European country to revoke residence status for more than 200 Syrian refugees. Additionally, Danish authorities were encouraging people to return to Syria, claiming that some parts of the country are safe enough to return.

## • UNHCR Warns of Increased Hardship for Displaced Venezuelans

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency, warns that the coming winter and continued COVID-19 pandemic are direct threats to the health and livelihoods of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Latin America. Nearly 2 million people have fled violence and economic collapse in Venezuela since 2013. Many have settled in Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Peru, and Uruguay. Some of these countries are among those with the highest rate of COVID-19 outbreaks in the world. As COVID-19 cases continue to grow, there is growing concern that Venezuelans will not be included in national health responses or given access to treatment for illness. On top of already stressed medical systems, the onset of winter and sub-zero temperatures will bring continued hardship to Venezuelan migrant communities.



## **USCRI Refugee Family Strengthening Program Found to Provide Gains in Relationship and Communication Skills**

On June 15, the Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Science published a study evaluating USCRI's Refugee Family Strengthening Program (RFS), a program designed to provide families with a path to financial self-sufficiency, support for parent-child and spousal relationships, and opportunities for conflict management skill-building. The ultimate goal of the program was to ensure refugees became contributing, successful members of U.S. society. Results of the RFS study demonstrated short-term gains in relationship and communication skills, conflict management skills, and increased awareness of personal finances. To read more about this study, [click here](#).

## **Upcoming Meetings & Events**

### **Facebook Live Series on Unaccompanied Children**

Although USCRI's Facebook Live Series on Unaccompanied Children has ended, you can still watch all 5 episodes by checking out our Facebook page [here](#).

### **Welcome for All: Supporting LGBTQ Refugees and Home and Abroad- June 22**

On Tuesday, June 22 at 2:00 PM EST, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society will host a panel with the City of West Hollywood to discuss ways community members can advocate for LGBTQ refugees and asylum seekers around the world. For more information and to register, [click here](#).

### **A Conversation with Iraq's Planning and Migration Ministers- June 23**

On Wednesday, June 23 at 10:30 AM EST, the U.S. Institute of Peace will host a discussion with Iraq's Minister of Migration and Displacement to address stabilization challenges and the status of Iraq's displaced communities. For more information and to register, [click here](#).

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