



## Response

23<sup>rd</sup> June 2021

### World Refugee Day 2021

World Refugee Day was first celebrated globally on 20<sup>th</sup> June 2001, the fiftieth anniversary of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and it has been celebrated on the same date annually ever since.

The UN theme for 2021 is 'Together We Heal, Learn and Shine.' In the second year of the pandemic it is clear that the theme seeks to focus on the absolute need for refugees to have access to health facilities, to the vaccine, and to psychological support. In the same way there is a fundamental challenge embedded in the theme at a time when the disruption to education generally brought the issue of access to education for refugees robustly to the fore. The reference to 'shining' is clearly a call to be beacons of hope in a time when anxiety and fear is a deep reality for everyone, and more so for refugees whose hope and confidence in the future is fragile at the best of times. The theme is a very clear call for greater solidarity, especially given the experiences of the pandemic.

In his speech to mark World Refugee Day, the UN Secretary General noted that refugees were affected disproportionately by the pandemic, but were also a formidable force as frontline workers in a number of spheres. In commenting on the theme for 2021 he said that building a post-pandemic world could only happen if we stand together, and he called for the needs of refugees to be factored into future policies on health, education and sport.

The South African Government in its short, almost generic-sounding, statement marking the Day recognised the resilience and courage of those forced to flee their homes.

In the light of the theme for 2021, it has been noted that asylum seekers and refugees are treated as international students when it comes to higher education. This is in fact in line with a particular jurisprudence attached to the Refugee Convention of 1951. Activists have long argued that South Africa's own commitments in terms of the Bill of Rights and the Refugee Law of 1998 in fact allow for a more generous interpretation and hence easier access to bursaries, scholarships and reductions in fees. It is noted that neither NSFAS nor the National Skills Fund are available to refugees and asylum seekers.

Of particular interest in the light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the many calls for a more compassionate, caring, welcoming world, an IPSOS survey carried out in 28 countries, engaging 19 000 adults, and specially designed for World Refugee Day in the light of the pandemic, sought to ascertain views with regard to refugees. The South African responses are very interesting:

- When asked whether people escaping war or persecution should be allowed into another country (including South Africa) 71% of South Africans agreed that they should, while 24% thought that they should not. It is interesting that SA was immediately below the USA, where 80% agreed and 20% disagreed.
- When asked whether SA should allow more refugees into the country especially in the light of the pandemic, 11% thought that there should be an increase, 30% thought that the quotas should remain the same as they were before the pandemic, and 53% thought that the numbers allowed in should be reduced. Here SA was just below the Netherlands, where 11% thought that there should be an increase,

44% thought that the numbers should remain the same, and 38% thought that fewer should be allowed in.

- When asked whether they thought that refugees would settle into their new country, South Africa, successfully, 55% thought they would and 32% thought they would not. SA was just below Australia, where 57% thought they would integrate and 37% thought otherwise.
- When asked whether the SA government should spend more on refugees due to the pandemic, 13% thought that the spending should be increased, 34% thought that it should remain the same and 43% thought that it should be decreased.
- When asked whether they thought that those who came into SA as refugees were in fact refugees or had maybe come for economic reasons or to take advantage of our welfare system, 71% agreed that they were not ‘real’ refugees but merely seeking economic and welfare advantages, while 27% disagreed with that sentiment. Here we came in just below India, where 72% agreed and 21% disagreed.
- When asked whether the country’s borders should be closed entirely to refugees on the understanding that no more could be admitted into the country at this time, 60% agreed with the statement and 37% disagreed. Here South Africa was again just below India where 69% agreed and 23% disagreed.

It is well known that surveys are subject to many nuances, variables, biases and interpretations, so it is to be understood that there will be different interpretations around these figures. IPSOS acknowledged that the South African sample reflected a “more urban, educated and affluent group than the general population and that the views should be understood as reflecting the more connected segment of the society.” Overall the survey found that in most countries 80% and upward of those surveyed agreed with the principle of seeking refuge from war and persecution in other countries, but few were open to letting more refugees into their country after the pandemic. Secondly, people were reluctant to see their governments spending more on refugees around the world due to the pandemic. Thirdly, people were divided over whether governments should have closed border policies. And finally, there was widespread scepticism about the motivations for refugees coming into a country.

Whatever considerations need to be taken into account when interpreting these survey results, it seems clear that this is not a time of unbounded goodwill and openness to refugees. Instead, it seems to be a time of scepticism, suspicion and parochialism. To an extent this mirrors the broader, international trends where populism, narrow nationalism and xenophobia are on the rise. It certainly does not seem to move towards enhancing and increasing the solidarity that is presupposed in the theme for 2021. Pope Francis has expressed a very different point of view, underlining the need for solidarity in his letter for the 107<sup>th</sup> World Day of Prayer for Migrants and Refugees. He speaks of “an ever-widening-we”. He writes: “Once this health crisis passes, our worst response would be to plunge even more deeply into feverish consumerism and new forms of egotistic self-preservation. God willing, after all this, we will think no longer in terms of ‘them’ and ‘those’, but only ‘us’.” This is indeed something to be worked towards.

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**Peter-John Pearson**  
**Director**

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