



UNHCR Corruption: Resettlement Spots for a Price

Since ‘vulnerability’ is no longer the key to selecting refugees for resettlement, does that mean bribery is?

By Nayla Rush

A story about alleged corruption in refugee resettlement at the UN refugee agency was published recently by NBC News.¹ The seven-month investigation into refugee processing centers in five countries — Kenya, Uganda, Yemen, Ethiopia, and Libya — found widespread reports of U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) staffers accepting bribes from refugees in order to refer them for resettlement in a Western country.

Years ago, as I began researching the UN’s role in the U.S. refugee resettlement program, I forewarned of the likely “subjectivity” of UNHCR’s national staff (citizens of the countries where they are working, usually in regions of turmoil and economic unrest) responsible for refugee status determinations and resettlement referrals.² Their appraisals can be at best complaisant and at worst open to the highest bidder.

In the wake of the NBC report, I looked at the five countries mentioned and found the following:

- In FY 2019, the United States resettled 2,756 refugees from the processing centers in Kenya, Uganda, Yemen, Ethiopia, and Libya.
- A total of 1,914 UNHCR staff members work at the refugee processing centers, of whom 79 percent (1,506) are national staff and 21 percent (408) international staff.
- The average Transparency International average corruption score in 2018 for the five countries was 23.6/100 (the lower the number the more corrupt). The average ranking of these five among the 180 ranked countries was 150.6 out of 180 (180 being the most corrupt country in the world — Somalia). For comparison, the United States had a score of 71/100 and ranked 22nd out of 180 countries.
- The United States is the top funder of UNHCR activities in four of the five countries.

UNHCR, Resettlement, and Fraud

UNHCR has the international mandate to determine who is (and who is not) attributed refugee status, to provide refugee assistance, and to decide who is eligible for resettlement in third countries. Resettlement is the “transfer of refugees from the country in which they have sought asylum to another state that has agreed to admit them as refugees and to grant them permanent settlement and the opportunity for eventual citizenship.”³ A number of countries (29 nations in 2018) participate in UNHCR’s resettlement program; the world’s top resettlement country remains the United States.⁴

UNHCR’s resettlement program is not impermeable to fraud. By UNHCR’s own admission, “Refugee status and resettlement places are valuable commodities, particularly in countries with acute poverty, where the temptation to make money by whatever means is strong. This makes the resettlement process a target for abuse.”⁵

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UNHCR distinguishes between “external resettlement fraud” and “internal resettlement fraud”.⁶ “External resettlement fraud” applies to “fraud perpetrated by persons other than those having a contractual relationship with UNHCR”, such as the refugees themselves. One example of external resettlement fraud is identity fraud: “Identity fraud occurs when an identity is either invented, or the identity of another real person is assumed by an impostor. Supporting documents may be missing, or fraudulent documents provided.” Other types include “family composition fraud”, “one of the areas where misrepresentation or fraud is most likely to be committed”; and “document fraud” or “material misrepresentation fraud”, whereby “refugees deliberately exaggerate, invent, or otherwise misrepresent the nature or details of their refugee claim or resettlement needs.”

“Internal resettlement fraud” (the subject of the NBC story) refers to fraud perpetrated by UNHCR staff themselves. Examples include drafting false refugee claims or false needs assessments for resettlement; facilitating preferential processing or access to the procedure; charging a fee or asking for a favor to be added to an interview list; coaching refugees prior to or during the interview; and providing false medical attestations. Resettlement procedures are free of charge, but the fraudulent actions described above are often undertaken for a fee, a favor, or a gift and constitute corruption.

Personal relationships with the refugees can also pose problems as “they involve a relationship of unequal power and are thus easily subject to exploitation. The staff member will always be perceived as having power over the refugee, and the refugee may thus feel obliged to provide favors, including those of a sexual nature, in order to obtain certain benefits, or to avoid negative repercussions.” This could be of added concern in countries where familiarity and congeniality are general cultural traits.

UNHCR has taken measures to combat fraud and corruption in order to “preserve the integrity of resettlement”. One of the most effective measures, according to the agency, is following standardized operating procedures carefully. Others include:

- Clearly defining roles and responsibilities for all staff;
- Counselling refugees on the implications of committing or being complicit in fraud before signing the RRF (Resettlement Registration Form); and
- Ensuring that there are file management and tracking systems that allow each step and action to be reconstructed.

Main NBC Investigation Findings

The NBC investigation showed widespread allegations of corruption within UNHCR’s refugee resettlement program:

The allegations of corruption at the UNHCR are not limited to one man or one place. A seven-month investigation across five countries with significant refugee populations has found widespread reports of the UNHCR’s staff members exploiting refugees, while victims and staff members who report wrongdoing say the agency fails to act against corruption, leaving them vulnerable to intimidation and retaliation.

NBC interviewed refugees, current and former UNHCR employees, aid workers, and two former U.N. investigators and reported the following:

Refugees, current and former UNHCR employees, aid workers and two former U.N. investigators say bribery and corruption are found in a variety of services the UNHCR and companion organizations are charged with providing, but report that it is especially unavoidable in resettlement — a precious opportunity for the world’s most vulnerable refugees to restart their lives in safe new countries, usually in the West.

...

UNHCR staffers and officials from organizations that work with them demand bribes for everything from medical referrals to food rations to contacting police, and it can cost \$5,000 in bribes to resettle a family.

A number of UNHCR staff members who denounced this fraudulent behavior claim they were replaced by “corrupt staffers in positions of power who were more willing to tolerate bribery or other misconduct.” Alternatively, staff suspected of misconduct may receive good references so they are promoted and moved to other locations.

According to the NBC report, in southwest Uganda, refugees claim that “resettlement, the ultimate prize, can cost 1 million Ugandan shillings to 3.5 million (\$268-\$938) for a person, \$5,000 for a family (or four cows, according to two refugee interviewees, who said the cows are shared between the Ugandan authorities and the UNHCR).”

Sex was another form of payment. Some refugee women and girls claimed they were asked for sex in exchange for resettlement promises.

Many refugees also complained of stolen identities and case details:

Refugees in Kenya, Uganda, Yemen, Ethiopia and Libya said being resettled on someone else’s case, after they’ve done the grunt work and initial interviews, substantially raises the cost of the payment demanded. The former U.N. contractor and middleman in Dadaab agreed. He said that it costs 3 million to 7 million Kenyan shillings (\$29,250-\$68,270) to buy an identity right at the end of the UNHCR process, when cases move over to potential host governments for vetting.

Exploitation of refugees by UNHCR staff is not new. The NBC article refers to a former senior UNHCR investigator and narcotics detective who in 2001 uncovered a refugee extortion racket in Kenya. He told NBC staff following this investigation: “We’re 18 years later, and it’s even worse now than ever before. ... The demand side of resettlement is enormous and the supply side is small. UNHCR refuses to look at the context in which it operates.”

UNHCR denied to NBC all accusations of fraud and corruption within its organization, admitting however to the existence of scammers who pose as UNHCR staff members to take advantage of refugees’ vulnerabilities and promise resettlement.

Resettlement Support Centers (RSC) Fraud

The NBC investigation relayed allegations of bribery and corruption taking place not just at UNHCR, but within “companion organizations” charged with providing services to refugees. The United States relies on UNHCR for refugee determinations and resettlement referrals and on the Resettlement Support Centers (RSC) for the pre-screening process and case applications of refugees.⁷ These “companion organizations” could be one or more of the nine State Department-funded RSCs abroad. RSCs act as overseas processing entities that pre-screen refugees abroad and help them build their cases to submit to U.S. officials for resettlement.

RSCs collaborate closely with the State Department:

The RSC conducts an in-depth interview with the applicant, enters the applicant’s documentation into the Department of State’s Worldwide Refugee Admission Processing System (WRAPS), cross references and verifies the data, and sends the information necessary to conduct a background check to other U.S. agencies.⁸

RSCs have a central role in the process of vetting refugees for security threats:

*U.S. national security agencies, including the National Counterterrorism Center, FBI, Department of Homeland Security (DHS), the Department of Defense, and the Department of State, as well as the intelligence community, begin screening the applicant **using the data transmitted from the RSCs.** [Emphasis added.]⁹*

Three RSCs — Church World Service, the International Rescue Committee, and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society — are also “resettlement agencies” (formerly called “voluntary agencies” or Volags) that get paid by the State Department per head to receive and place them inside the United States.¹⁰ The conflict of interest is clear.¹¹

RSC staff (who are generally citizens of the countries they are stationed in) are entrusted with an important part of the resettlement process. They conduct in-person pre-screening interviews, help refugee applicants prepare their cases, and collect information that U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) officers later use to adjudicate cases. Also, all biographic checks are based on data gathered by RSCs. The RSCs’ pre-screening job is less than perfect, to say the least.

A U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) review of the U.S. Refugee Admission Program’s (USRAP) screening process and vulnerability to fraud uncovered major concerns with RSC case preparations, including staff fraud.¹²

GAO staff observed RSC caseworkers as they reviewed applicants’ identification documents (passport, birth certificate, marriage certificate), recorded name variations (alternate name spellings), and family tree information; and took note of the applicants’ flight journey and persecution stories (information later used by USCIS officers in their interviews, as we noted above).

GAO found that measures put in place by the U.S. State Department to monitor RSCs’ performance and evaluate their key activities like pre-screening and preparation of case files for resettlement applicants were insufficient. Of the 70 Refugee Affairs Division (RAD) trip reports GAO analyzed that contained feedback on RSC activities, only 10 (14 percent) showed satisfaction with RSC case preparations; 45 (64 percent) identified major concerns. Other concerns such as staff fraud and applicant fraud were also underlined by GAO.

The Resettlement Support Center for sub-Saharan Africa that covers Ethiopia, Kenya, and Uganda and is based in Nairobi is the Church World Service (CWS).¹³ CWS, as mentioned above, also acts as a resettlement agency inside the United States.

The RSC for the Middle East and North Africa, which cover countries like Libya and Yemen and is based in Amman, Jordan, is run by the International Organization for Migration (IOM).¹⁴

UNHCR Staff, Mostly Local

UNHCR’s workforce constitutes the “backbone” of the refugee agency.¹⁵ The agency employs some 16,765 staff in 138 countries, of whom nearly 90 percent are based in the field close to where refugees are. Refugees usually flee to neighboring countries in regions of turmoil and conflict. The largest portion of staff works in countries in Asia and Africa, continents that host as well as generate the most refugees. Many of these hosting countries are themselves beset by political instability, civil unrest, and economic hardships (not to mention human rights and corruption issues).

UNHCR local staff, in unsettled countries where citizens are already struggling, are likely to be tempted to abuse their position of power to take advantage of refugees’ vulnerabilities.

UNHCR Staff Composition. Following NBC’s investigation of UNHCR resettlement processes in Kenya, Uganda, Yemen, Ethiopia, and Libya, let’s look at these countries’ respective data on UNHCR staff composition (Table 1), country corruption indexes (Table 2), and U.S. funding (Table 3).

Table 1. UNHCR Staff Composition

Country	National Staff	International Staff	Total
Kenya	353	63	416
Uganda	455	123	578
Yemen	200	36	236
Ethiopia	389	133	522
Libya	109	53	162

Sources: [“UNHCR Kenya Operation Factsheet June 2018”](#), Global Focus UNHCR Operations Worldwide website; [“UNHCR Uganda Factsheet February 2019”](#), Global Focus UNHCR Operations Worldwide website; [“UNHCR Yemen Factsheet January 2019”](#), Global Focus UNHCR Operations Worldwide website; [“UNHCR Ethiopia: Fact Sheet \(February 2019\)”](#), Reliefweb website; [“UNHCR Libya Factsheet February 2019”](#), Global Focus UNHCR Operations Worldwide website.

A total of 1,914 UNHCR staff members work in these five countries, of whom 79 percent (1,506) are national staff and 21 percent (408) international staff. Corruption might be more widespread among local staff who work in troubled settings and are citizens of countries that face economic setbacks, social turmoil, and corruption issues.

Country Corruption Index. Transparency International’s “Corruption Perception Index 2018” ranked 180 countries and territories by their perceived levels of public sector corruption using a scale of 0 to 100, where 0 is highly corrupt and 100 is very clean.¹⁶

Somalia was last on the list of 180 countries, scoring 10/100 and earning it the spot of the most corrupt country in the world in 2018. The least corrupt country was Denmark, with a score of 88/100.

The average corruption score in 2018 for the five countries was 23.6/100. The average ranking was 150.6/180 (180 being the most corrupt country in the world). For comparison, the United States had a score of 71/100 and a ranking of 22/180.

UNHCR Funding. The United States is UNHCR's top funder in four of the five countries in question.

Number of Refugees Resettled in the United States. The Refugee Processing Center Portal tracks arrivals of resettled refugees into the United States by processing country.¹⁷ A total of 2,756 refugees from processing centers with widespread allegations of UNHCR staff corruption have been resettled in the United States so far in FY 2019. There have been no refugees resettled from the processing centers in Libya or Yemen, but the numbers for the reporting period October 1, 2018 (beginning of FY 2019) through March 31, 2019 for the other three countries are:

- Ethiopia: 638
- Kenya: 395
- Uganda: 1,723

Do we know how many bribed themselves out of these hosting countries for a life in the United States?

Conclusion

The United States is entrusting the local staff of UNHCR with the selection of refugees eligible for resettlement in the United States, and entrusting the RSC staff with pre-screening and preparation of case files for resettlement applicants. We don't know much about these men and women the U.S. government believes possess the exceptional good judgment, expertise, and integrity needed to make refugee determinations and resettlement referrals. But we do know that most work in difficult conditions and are citizens of unsettled countries where corruption is at times deemed an acceptable, even necessary, means of survival.

Let's not forget that resettlement is one of UNHCR's "durable solutions". Resettled refugees are required by law "to apply for a green card (permanent residence) in the United States one year after being admitted as a refugee".¹⁸ They can apply for citizenship four years later (not five, as the five-year count for refugees starts on the day of arrival). From this perspective, a resettlement card gives access to citizenship. UNHCR staff are, in a way, deciding not only who can move to the United States, they are also choosing who will have the opportunity to

Table 2. Corruption Ranks and Scores

Country	Rank	Score
Ethiopia	114/180	34/100
Kenya	144/180	27/100
Uganda	149/180	26/100
Libya	170/180	17/100
Yemen	176/180	14/100

Source: "[Corruption Perception Index 2018](#)", Transparency International website.

Table 3. UNHCR Funding

Country	2019 Financial Requirements (millions)	Percent Funded as of April 2, 2019	Top Five Contributors	Amount (millions)
Kenya	\$170.1	14%	United States	\$8.5
			Japan	\$2.5
			Denmark	\$2.0
			European Union	\$1.5
			Sweden	\$0.8
Uganda	\$448.8	11%	United States	\$22.4
			Denmark	\$9.9
			Germany	\$6.0
			Republic of Korea	\$2.5
			Norway	\$1.2
Yemen	\$198.6	27%	United States	\$10.0
			United Kingdom	\$4.5
			Japan	\$3.6
			European Union	\$3.4
			Sweden	\$1.6
Ethiopia	\$346.5	13%	United States	\$17.3
			United Kingdom	\$6.9
			Denmark	\$4.9
			IKEA Foundation	\$2.3
			Japan	\$2.0
Libya	\$85.0	58%	European Union	\$12.6
			United States	\$6.0
			Germany	\$5.9
			Italy	\$2.6
			Netherlands	\$2.0

Source: Global Focus UNHCR Operations Worldwide websites for: "[Kenya](#)", accessed April 2, 2019; "[Uganda](#)", accessed April 2, 2019; "[Yemen](#)", accessed April 2, 2019; "[Ethiopia](#)", accessed April 2, 2019; and "[Libya](#)", accessed February 11, 2019.

become an American. Given such high stakes, and the reports of abuses, the U.S. government might want to reconsider the whole resettlement referral system put in place by UNHCR.

If “vulnerability” is no longer the key to selecting refugees for resettlement, does that mean bribery is?¹⁹

End Notes

¹ Sally Hayden, [“Asylum for sale: Refugees say some U.N. workers demand bribes for resettlement”](#), NBC News, April 6, 2019.

² Nayla Rush, [“The UN’s Role in U.S. Refugee Resettlement: A “benefit of the doubt” screening policy”](#), Center for Immigration Studies, June 10, 2017.

³ [“UNHCR Resettlement Handbook”](#), UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2011.

⁴ Nayla Rush, [“U.S. Resettled More Refugees than Any Other Nation in 2017 and 2018”](#), Center for Immigration Studies, March 14, 2019.

⁵ [“Policy and Procedural Guidelines: Addressing Resettlement Fraud Perpetrated by Refugees”](#), UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), March 2008.

⁶ [“UNHCR Resettlement Handbook”](#), UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), 2011.

⁷ [“Who We Serve”](#), Cultural Orientation Resource Exchange (CORE) website.

⁸ [“The Refugee Processing and Screening System \(text version of infographic\)”](#), U.S. Department of State website, January 20, 2017.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ [“United States Resettlement Partners”](#), UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) website.

¹¹ Nayla Rush, [“IRC’s Involvement in the U.S.-Australia Refugee Deal: A Clear Conflict of Interest”](#), Center for Immigration Studies, June 13, 2017.

¹² [“Refugees: Actions Needed by State Department and DHS to Further Strengthen Applicant Screening Process and Assess Fraud Risks”](#), United States Government Accountability Office (GAO), July 2017.

¹³ [“Refugee resettlement from sub-Saharan Africa”](#), Church World Service (CWS) website.

¹⁴ [“Resettlement”](#), International Organization for Migration-Jordan (IOM) website.

¹⁵ [“Figures at a Glance”](#), UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) website.

¹⁶ [“Corruption Perception Index 2018”](#), Transparency International website.

¹⁷ [“Admissions and Arrivals”](#), Refugee Processing Center, accessed April 10, 2019.

¹⁸ [“Green Card for a Refugee”](#), U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services website, last updated March 30, 2011.

¹⁹ Nayla Rush, [“Vulnerability’ Is No Longer the Key to Selecting Refugees for Resettlement: But we knew that already”](#), Center for Immigration Studies, October 23, 2017.