



# We need Express Entry family reunification

**Our Vision: speedy family reunification, where children are reunited with their parents in 6 months or less**

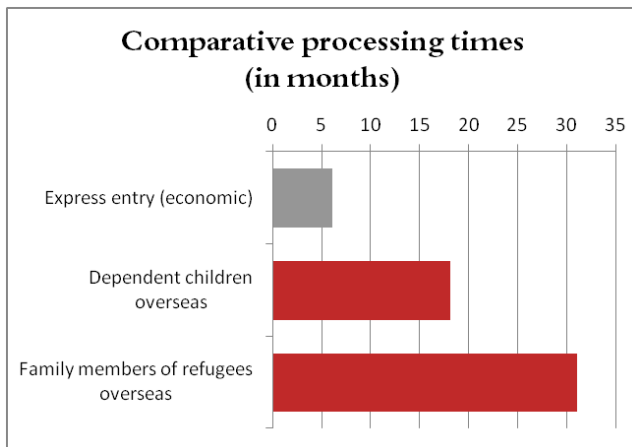
Canada's immigration processing for family reunification cases is extraordinarily slow. Many children wait **over two years** before being able to reunite with their parent in Canada. For refugee families, the wait is **31 months**.



Canada can and must do better.

Citizenship and Immigration Canada (CIC) has introduced an Express Entry program for economic immigrants. For immigrants with a valid job offer, CIC will process applications within 6 months.

Shouldn't children be reunited with their parents at least as quickly as economic immigrants are processed?



\*All names are fictitious to protect individuals' safety.

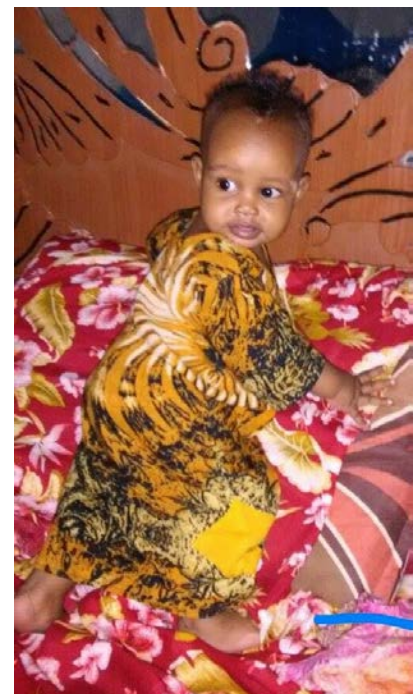
Ahmed\* fled Somalia, where he faced persecution from Al-Shabaab, and reached Canada in November 2013. In March 2014 he was accepted as a refugee and was immediately keen to be reunited with his pregnant wife, Hibo, who was a refugee in Nairobi.

Somalis in Kenya were being rounded up by the police at this period: when Ahmed heard that a pregnant Somali woman had been thrown from a balcony to her death, he feared the worst, especially when he could not reach his wife. To his relief, it was not Hibo. She had been detained in the stadium in Nairobi with many other Somali refugees, but was able to get free.

Ahmed and Hibo agreed that she should go to Ethiopia where, in July 2014, she gave birth to a baby girl, without medical assistance, in the house she shares with a relative of Ahmed's.

Hibo and her daughter have no status in Ethiopia, no right to work, and no access to health care. They survive on the money sent by Ahmed.

Based on current processing times for the region, Ahmed's daughter could be **three years old** before he sees her.



## Family at grave risk as violence escalates in Burundi

Clothilde's family has been suffering intense persecution in Burundi for years. Among the long list of horrors befalling the family are attacks, false accusations, murder, a house burned down and rape. After arriving on her own in Canada, Clothilde was recognized as a refugee in July 2013. She then applied for permanent residence for herself, and for her husband and children who are still in Burundi.

Clothilde asked for processing of the application to be expedited because of threats to their security. To protect themselves, the family was not living together and the children were sent to live with various different families.

All the papers required were submitted at the visa office (Nairobi) in April 2014. One year later, in April 2015, CIC confirmed that the visa office had received the documents, but noted that they had not been given even a preliminary review.

In 2014, Clothilde's daughter, then aged 7 years, was sexually assaulted by a member of the Imbonerakure, the youth wing of the party in power, which is accused of committing political violence.

With the approach of elections, Burundi is becoming increasingly dangerous. Clothilde is following the news about the rise in political violence and killings that have forced more than 100,000 refugees to flee from Burundi.

Regular processing times are **32 months for the region**.

The Nairobi visa office has the largest caseload of refugee family reunification cases: nearly 900 people. Only one in five are processed in **19 months or less**.

## Young boy at risk of forced gang recruitment

When she was forced to flee for her life, Marcela reluctantly left her young son Eduardo in the care of family members in El Salvador. In July 2014 Canada recognized Marcela and her husband Francisco as refugees. Right away in August they applied for permanent residence for themselves and Eduardo.

Eduardo is now 9 years old. He lives with his grandmother, who is in poor health. The village where they live is infested by gangs that have already attacked other family members as well as forcing Marcela and Francisco to flee. Young as he is, Eduardo is getting to the age when boys are forcibly recruited by gangs – or physically assaulted if they resist. Eduardo's cousin and uncle were in fact attacked and forced to flee when they resisted recruitment. Marcela is terrified that one day she will get a call from her mother saying that Eduardo has been badly hurt by gang members.

Eduardo talks to his parents daily on the phone. He tells his mother: "I am so sad. I miss you. I want to be with you in Canada. When can I come?" He is particularly upset every Mother's Day because he is the only child at school without a mother. He has never met his young sister, born here.



Processing times for family members of refugees in the region are **29 months**.

## A family divided

Marina Noor and two of her children are in Canada, while her husband and 13-year-old son are refugees in Pakistan. They have been trying to reunite since 2011. Even though they have complied with all the requests for documentation made by the visa office, the file is stalled. No one can get an explanation for the delay from the visa office, not Marina's husband when he goes to the visa office in Islamabad (and stands in line all day), not Marina's Member of Parliament, not Marina's lawyer, whose letters to the visa office go unanswered.

As Afghan refugees in Pakistan, Marina's husband and son are in a precarious situation. They live in fear of being arrested and questioned. Mr. Noor sells vegetables in a kiosk on the street to support himself and his son, Farhan. Farhan is not going to school: he does not have a study permit, and his parents are afraid that he might be kidnapped and held for ransom, on the assumption that his family must have money since they are in Canada. The Noors have already lost one child: their eldest son went missing in 2009 and has never been found.

Farhan is longing to be with his mother. His siblings in Canada are also suffering from the separation from their father and younger brother. They are constantly thinking about them and asking their mother why it is taking so long for them to join them in Canada. They are doing as well as they can in school but they are under stress from the constant worry about their father and brother.

"I am spending my life over here and he is spending his life over there and we are in a limbo situation, struggling to get through every day."

Marina is suffering from depression. Her psychiatrist believes that the prolonged separation is a factor in her condition.

## When delays cost lives

Gabriela had been waiting for nearly two years to join her father in Canada, when she died in suspicious circumstances in Ecuador.

Pablo, her father, was an indigenous community leader until he was forced to flee persecution. Canada recognized him as a refugee in 2011, but immigration processing of his family members in Ecuador has taken **more than three years**, leaving them exposed to attacks from his persecutors who target his children since they can't reach him. The children have been harassed, threatened and physically assaulted. The family's dogs have been killed. The family believes that Gabriela was deliberately killed: her death was never properly investigated. Recently someone wrote "Sons of traitors will not live" on the family's car.

Pablo applied for permanent residence in December 2011.

Unfortunately the family members' file got lost in the system and it was only in

October 2014, **nearly three years later**, that

Citizenship and Immigration Canada finally sent their file to the relevant visa office. Pablo's daughter has written about the wait:



"these have been very sad years, but the part that makes us the saddest is that the bad people still kill our dogs and I think that these bad people don't have a heart... Now, my father says he has found a beautiful and safe place to live called Canada. He says in this place they respect people's dogs, and I believe him... God, can I ask you something? How many dogs do I need to bury? Please, Lord, can you help us be together again with our father? Can anyone help us? We only want to be with our dad and never leave his side."

## **Children in Syria waiting to be reunited with their mother**

Hana's four children – the youngest just 11 years old – are in Syria, where they have been waiting for over a year to be reunited with their mother.

Hana was recognized as a refugee in Canada in April 2014. She sent in her application for permanent residence, including for her four sons, in May 2014. She was notified that the application for one of her sons was incomplete: she resubmitted it in August 2014. Since then she has been waiting for the application to be processed, although she requested that it be expedited and enlisted the support of her local Member of Parliament.

The civil war in Syria has affected the family personally. Hana's oldest son was beaten several times by security forces for no apparent reason, when he was only 16 years old. Another son, then aged 12 years, was beaten by a soldier during a raid on their home in the middle of the night. The children are only able to attend school sporadically, depending on safety conditions.

All four sons have also experienced physical and emotional abuse at home, at the hands of their father.

The family's health has suffered as a result of the separation: both children and mother have sought medical help for stress-related ailments.

Feeling abandoned by their mother, some of Hana's children now refuse to talk to her.

Regular processing times are **32 months for the region**.

According to Hana, being separated from her children is the hardest thing ever. No one can know what it is like unless they have experienced it.

## **Still waiting after four and a half years**

Ihssan arrived in Canada in October 2008, having fled persecution in Afghanistan as an activist in favour of human and women's rights. Unfortunately, due to delays in the refugee claim process at the time, she had to wait two years for a hearing on her refugee claim.

Having been accepted as a refugee in November 2010, Ihssan wasted no time in submitting her permanent residence application, for herself and for her children back home, aged at that time 13, 16, 18 and 22 years.

In July 2011, three of Ihssan's children had to flee from Afghanistan to Tajikistan in search of safety, after their father was kidnapped. The Taliban also attempted to recruit Ihssan's son: he refused to join them and now lives in hiding from the Taliban.

For Ihssan's youngest daughter, the separation from her mother has been particularly difficult. She suffers from symptoms of depression and psychological trauma, and on one occasion tried to take her own life. Her older sister feels she must constantly watch over her for fear of what she might do to herself.

Ihssan recently learned that her daughter was being lured by a trafficker who is offering to take her to Dubai and the USA, with promises of a good life.

The struggles over Canadian immigration processing have caused great stress and caused rifts within the family. Ihssan has withdrawn the application for her husband in the hopes of speeding up the process for her children.

Yet they are still waiting.

After more than four years of processing, all but one of Ihssan's children overseas are adults, and the youngest turns 18 later this year.

## “I don't know how much longer I can bear to be away from my daughter”

Shamso arrived in Canada in late 2009, having fled Somalia. She had to wait until March 2011 for her refugee claim to be decided. Having been recognized as a refugee, she applied for permanent residence as soon as she could get the money together for the application.

Shamso included on her application her husband and young daughter, now aged 11, who are refugees in Mombasa, Kenya. They have no status in Kenya and are easily harassed and targeted. The family survives on money sent by Shamso, and odd jobs. Shamso's husband is hard-working and will do any job he can, but with the money he earns he cannot always give his daughter enough to eat.

Shamso's daughter cries whenever she speaks to her mother and begs her to come and get her. She talks about her fears of men in the neighbourhood who might rape her. Shamso knows the situation there is not safe there for young girls like her daughter. The worst times for Shamso have been when her daughter was seriously sick.

“I can hardly eat for all my worry about my daughter and husband. I am like skin and bones.”

Shamso has been waiting for family reunification for **four years**. Recently, after years with no movement in the file, the visa office told the family that they will need to undergo DNA testing.



## Family members living in hiding

Lamine came to Canada because he faced persecution as a Christian in Bangladesh. Two years after her arrival, in April 2014, he was accepted as a refugee.

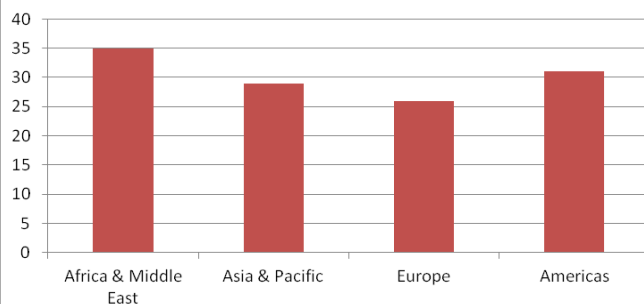
Lamine, however, did not feel fully protected because he knew the lives of his wife and children back home were still in jeopardy.

In July 2014 Lamine submitted his permanent residence application. Since then he often checks the status of the application online. 10 months later, processing has not yet begun.

Lamine's family, including children aged 5, 7 and 7, are living in hiding. They live in great fear that their whereabouts will be discovered by the same fundamentalist groups that targeted Lamine. They can scarcely go out. Lamine's wife is not able to work so they are struggling financially, although Lamine sends what money he can.

Under the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Canada has a legal obligation to deal with applications to reunite children with their parents “in a positive, humane and expeditious manner”.

Processing times in months, by region, for family members of refugees



Unless otherwise stated, processing times are calculated based on number of months to complete processing of 80% of cases, for latest available period: 12 months preceding Sept. 30, 2014. Statistics are calculated from information licensed under the Open Government Licence – Canada.