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## Trauma, depression, hopelessness – will going to the US heal refugee pain?

The one-off deal brokered by Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and his Minister for Immigration and Border Protection Peter Dutton, for the resettlement of refugees on Manus Island and Nauru to the United States has the potential to go a long way to finally giving these people a new start.

At this stage, it is unknown how many of the 1269 individuals on Manus Island and Nauru, including 178 children now on Nauru, to whom it will apply.

The Nauru Government, the Labor Opposition and refugee advocates, have welcomed the agreement.

It is vital now that more detail and more action follow swiftly.

It is well documented by the UNHCR, among other expert groups and professionals that the people detained in Manus and Nauru have suffered from the despair and hopelessness of living in limbo – not knowing where and when they may be able to restart normal lives.

The past three years have exacerbated uncertainty, dislocation and mental anguish for many in a population that is already highly traumatised by experiences of war, fear and tragedy in their homelands, as well as the whole traumatic process of flight and dislocation from their country of origin.

While the UNHCR has endorsed the deal, it is clear that it has not been part of the agreement. This is, as has been reiterated, a one-off bilateral agreement between Australia and the United States.

So what can Manus and Nauru refugees expect from the US/Australian process from here?

UNHCR reports reveal that less than one percent of the world's 21.3 million refugees are eventually resettled in third countries.

Today the United States is the world's top resettlement country. It is estimated that the US government will admit 85,000 refugees from around the world, with over 30,000 coming from the Near East and South Asia (of which at least 10,000 will be from Syria) this year.

The US has more than 300 local resettlement agencies whose task it is to support refugees to establish a permanent base; ensure children and adults have access to schools, vocational education and language classes, that they find suitable employment, form relationships with their local community and become productive members of their new communities.

Announcing the deal, Minister Dutton said that officers from the US Department of Homeland Security would arrive in Australia shortly to commence work on processing the Manus and Nauru group. Women and children will be a priority in choosing those who wish to resettle rather than accept the 20-year visa to stay on Nauru or return to their country of origin.

We have no details of the US procedures for these assessments but it is likely that they will be similar to those employed by Australia and other resettlement countries.

Officers from the Department of Homeland Security will go through rigorous screening to determine whether refugees meet their domestic resettlement criteria, which includes health, security and character checks.

For many refugees on Manus and Nauru this will be a “same test, different examiner” scenario, but with so much more immediately at stake, many will go through the process with a much diminished capacity to cope with any uncertainty or stress.

If the PM's announcement does lead to durable policy solutions, then this will indeed be a fresh start for many traumatised people.

But there must be real and genuine efforts to make the transition from uncertainty and temporality to permanent status for refugees as soon as possible.

It will be important that this process include strong consultation with refugees in an atmosphere that is not adversarial.

For children in particular, mental-health literature stresses the need for coordination of services that are trauma-informed, environments that are safe and predictable, and the stability of supportive relationships over time.

Unlike a legal or political bureaucracy where relationships can become impersonal, in cases where individuals have suffered trauma and dislocation, personal, trusting relationships become hugely significant to achieve successful engagement with refugees.

The resolution of “life on hold” for the refugees in Manus and Nauru should be a very positive conclusion to a long running psychologically traumatic experience.

However, some factors may make it less than smooth.

People who are currently temporarily in Australia may need to return to Manus Island or Nauru if they are to have access to the new deal and this may be a difficult and complex negotiation in particular for the children.

For refugees who have who had tried to join family already settled and living in Australia, the prospect of finally being free in the US without any capacity to ever be with the people they love in Australia – if Turnbull's new provisions about boat arrivals are passed - may in itself be deeply traumatic.

Priority is being given to families and children, often viewed as the most vulnerable; however, there are many adults, mostly men but some women, who are also very vulnerable and traumatised. Hope is a fundamental requirement for mental stability and trauma recovery. Such individuals must also be meaningfully engaged.

It is now vital that in coordinating this transition, communication and trust underpin the settlement process.

Taking whatever steps are possible to rebuild lives begins before they arrive on US soil.

Those managing the process - starting with US officials undertaking the assessment - need to do so with a full understanding of the effects of trauma.

An important start will be to ensure the settlement process is experienced as something done *with them, not to them*.

The US Government asserts that refugees share many of America's values: courage, resilience, openness to new experiences, and the determination to rebuild their lives in a new place. This is a valuable and hopeful sentiment and one that should be front of mind as they undertake the process of resettlement so that it helps to heal the trauma and bring an end to the excruciating uncertainty these refugees have endured.

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