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Press Release

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Migrant rights organisations call for “leave for all” to protect public health

Over 20 front-line facing organisations working with asylum seekers, refugees, and those with irregular immigration status have today called for a grant of a period of ‘leave to remain’ to those with insecure immigration status, to allow them to access the health service and labour market. In a joint letter drafted by the Jesuit Refugee Service UK, the organisations have called upon the Prime Minister to protect public health and the welfare of everyone in society by granting a period of ‘leave to remain’ to those awaiting decisions from the Home Office, those who have been refused asylum, and those who are undocumented.

A period of leave to remain is a vital step to protect public health during the COVID-19 pandemic. People with insecure immigration status face multiple barriers to accessing support, housing and healthcare. Allowing people to regularise their status, the organisations argue, is the most effective and comprehensive way of ensuring they get the support they need during this crisis, and thereby protecting UK society as a whole.

At a time when the public health emergency makes it essential for everyone to be able to access to safe accommodation and healthcare, insecure immigration status acts as a barrier and puts everyone’s health at risk. Many of those with insecure immigration status who are or have been supported by the front-line organisations, experience homelessness and precarious housing situations, making social distancing and self-isolation impossible, and increasing vulnerability to infection. People with insecure immigration status often live in complete destitution and rely on small hardship grants or food parcels from charities. Even in normal circumstances, this means they face a day to day struggle for survival, and at the moment, with many charities closed and with restrictions on movement, this is leaving many already vulnerable individuals in dire circumstances. We are hearing heartrending stories of homelessness, exploitation and hunger.

One woman, Sarah (not her real name) who has been supported by co-signatory of the letter Women for Refugee Women, has stayed in various places in London ever since her asylum claim was refused and she became destitute. When they spoke with her on 14 April, she had no money, no food, and nowhere to stay. Even though WRW involved other organisations, including large charities, Sarah’s local authority, and homelessness services, there was simply no immediate pathway into safe accommodation for Sarah. Hotels and hostels were full or had put in place strict

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criteria that meant they were unable to take her even the charity offered to pay for her stay, and she ended up sleeping outside on a night bus and then in a London park for two nights.

The welfare of those with irregular immigration status, such as Sarah, is tightly bound with the welfare of all in society. Without the right to work or access to mainstream benefits, people with insecure immigration status live in destitution. No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) rules have often prevented local councils from accessing funding to accommodate and support people. Furthermore, the 'hostile environment' policies and the Government's focus on immigration enforcement, create a fear and reluctance among many to make themselves known to local authorities, while NHS charging and data-sharing between the Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Care can deter migrants from accessing healthcare. Difficulty accessing healthcare in turn leads to health problems becoming more severe and an increased risk to the wider public as well as individuals themselves.

A grant of 'leave to remain' is the most effective way of ensuring people can access support they need during this crisis, and thereby protecting society as a whole.

It is also the quickest way to ensure all are able to contribute to the national effort, bringing many skilled workers back to support front line work, whether in hospitals, care, food distribution or cleaning.

Granting a period of leave to all also recognises the challenges for the Home Office in making decisions at a time when people will find it difficult to gather information necessary for evidence for their case and when neither lawyers nor Home Office are able to meet people face-to-face.

Sarah Teather, Director of JRS UK said:

“Granting temporary leave to all migrants during this emergency is a simple, efficient and effective way to protect public health and harness the skills of many for the national cause. We cannot afford to have trained nurses, doctors, care workers and other key workers barred from contributing to society when they are desperately needed.

“The wellbeing of every person matters, more now than ever before: anyone unable to access stable housing or basic provisions places themselves and potentially others in danger. We have to act. The quickest and easiest solution is to grant everyone with an outstanding immigration application immediate leave and the right to work, and to provide a fast route to regularise others, bringing them out of the shadows and into the workforce. It is the only way to protect public health, get help to those who need it and get everyone contributing what they can. Now is the time to work together and unite to save lives.”

Natasha Walter, director of Women for Refugee Women, said:

“For too long, our society has been failing some of its most vulnerable members. The pandemic has made this failure even clearer. We work with women who are struggling, who are homeless, who are hungry, who are unwell, who are facing abuse. But during this time of terrible hardship we are also seeing a great deal of solidarity and understanding of our shared humanity. It’s time to build on this surge of empathy, to reach out to those who have fallen through the gaps and ensure that they have the means to care for themselves and others. A grant of leave to remain for all those with insecure immigration status would give every individual the possibility of living their lives with safety and dignity, and contributing to society, through this crisis and after.”

- Ends -

Notes to Editor

- 1. The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS)** is an international Catholic organisation, at work in 51 countries around the world with a shared mission to accompany, serve and advocate on behalf of refugees and other forcibly displaced persons. In the UK, our work currently focuses on those who find themselves destitute as a consequence of government policies and those detained for the administration of immigration procedures.
- 2. The letter to Prime Minister is attached to this Press Release.**
- 3. List of co-signatories to the letter to the Prime Minister as follows:**
 - Sarah Teather, Director JRS UK Sarah Teather, Director JRS UK
 - Natasha Walter, Director, Women for Refugee Women
 - Sally Daghlain, OBE, Chief Executive, Praxis
 - Celia Clarke, Director, Bail for Immigration Detainees
 - Zrinka Bralo, CEO, Migrants Organise
 - Julie Bishop, Director, The Law Centres Network
 - Ali McGinley, Director, AVID
 - Daf Viney, Director of Services, Hackney Migrant Centre
 - Jo Cobby, CEO, Youngroots
 - Brian Mitchell, Immigration Advisor, Notre Dame Refugee Centre
 - Warren Lee, Early Action Development Worker, Southwark Day Centre for Asylum Seekers
 - Lorraine Masiya Mponela, Chairperson, Coventry Asylum and Refugee Action Group,
 - Benjamin Morgan, EEA homeless rights project coordinator, Public Interest Law Centre
 - Robina Qureshi, Director, Positive Action in Housing
 - Mauricio Silva, Co-ordinator, Fatima House
 - Ibtisam Al-Farah, Cofounder – Training and Development Director, DEWA
 - Felix Kupay, Chairperson, Entraide (Mutual Aid)
 - Phil Davis, Coordinator, Hope Projects

Mel Steel, Director, Voices in Exile
Denise McDowell, Chief Executive, Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit
Traci Kirkland, Head of Charity, Govan Community Project

4. Background

Why a period of leave to remain?

A period of leave to remain is a vital step to protect public health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Lack of secure immigration status continues to act as a barrier to accessing support, housing and healthcare. Allowing people to regularise their status is the most effective way of ensuring they get the support they need during this crisis, and of thereby protecting society as a whole.

- **Homelessness makes social distancing and self-isolation impossible, and increases vulnerability to infection.** Without the right to work or access to mainstream benefits, people with insecure immigration status often live in complete destitution. No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) rules have prevented local councils from accessing funding to accommodate and support people.
- **NHS charging and data-sharing between the Home Office and the Department of Health and Social Care deters migrants from accessing healthcare,** even for diseases that are exempt.
- **Ability to work would mean everyone is able to participate in our struggle against Covid-19.** We cannot afford to have trained nurses, doctors, care workers and other key workers barred from contributing to society when they are desperately needed.

To ensure ready access to support and services, this must occur alongside existing efforts to provide accommodation to everyone who needs it, rather than replacing them. **The Hostile Environment must end. NRPF rules must be suspended, and all NHS charging and data-sharing between the NHS Trusts and the Home Office should also be paused for the duration of the pandemic, irrespective of uptake of any new regularisation routes.**

What about ongoing applications for status?

- Ongoing asylum claims, or other immigration application, would continue. It is very likely that decision-making delays will be exacerbated and so a grant of leave provides some certainty to applicants and allows the Home Office to effectively manage their caseload. We are not asking the Home Office to pause grants of asylum.

What kind of leave

The leave needs to be long enough to protect people throughout the pandemic and into the uncertain period in which society must rebuild; it needs to give people a real chance to contribute. A short period of leave would anyway mean problems it is intended to solve resurfaced again during the pandemic, which would be impractical.

Possibility of renewal: At the end of the leave period we are asking for an opportunity for people to regularise their status long-term. This will help to incentivise people to come forward, and it will ultimately prevent people from being uprooted from communities. At the end of the pandemic, we need to focus on rebuilding society and the economy, not tearing it apart.

JRS UK supports people who struggle through the asylum system for years. Many are eventually recognised as refugees. The systems that marginalise them and so many others for whom the UK is home have long be dangerous, and bad for us all. Now, they are catastrophic. It is time to acknowledge that the welfare of one is bound up with the welfare of all. That is even truer now than ever.

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