

REPAIR PROJECT

UNITED KINGDOM

ABIER'S STORY



Abier was forced to flee Sudan and sought asylum in the UK in 2020. Alone and separated from her four children, an initial family reunification process enabled her two younger children to join her, but it was another two years before her older boys – who turned 18 during their separation – were able to make the journey.

“When I was granted refugee status in 2021, the British Red Cross Refugee Support team in Bristol helped me to find my feet, but the main issue was that I was separated from my children, I was desperate for them to join me.

As I had refugee status, I was able to apply for them to join me. The application is free, but there are solicitors' fees and other costs like TB testing, DNA testing, and translation of documents. For people like me, it can be impossible to cover these costs on our own. In the UK, most Asylum seekers do not have the right

to work and asylum support is minimal, so we cannot earn or save the money that is needed.

I could not afford a solicitor, but I heard about someone who would provide advice more cheaply, even though they were not a qualified legal advisor. They helped me apply for my three youngest children, but would not apply for my eldest son, Khalid, as he was over 18 and they said it would be too complicated.

But the applications were submitted a week after my next oldest boy, Mazin, turned 18, and although the younger two were granted visas, Mazin was refused because he was too old by one week.

The British Red Cross team helped arrange flights, and my youngest two arrived in Bristol in 2022. We had been apart for two years.

But my two eldest sons, Mazin and Khalid, were still stuck in Sudan.

In April 2022, through the REPAIR project, the Red Cross together with the Migrant Legal Project began helping me apply to bring Mazin and Khalid to the UK.

It was complicated because of their ages. I was told applications like theirs are often only granted after appeal, if at all, and it was likely to be a long and costly process.

A year later, the process was still ongoing, but the conflict in Sudan had worsened. Our ancestral home had been destroyed and Mazin and Khalid had fled.



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BritishRedCross

To find out more about the achievements and findings of the REPAIR project – read our online report, and access our online toolkit using the QR Codes.



Online Toolkit



Online Report

I was so worried about them, but they had managed to leave Sudan and get to Saudi Arabia, where they were able to submit visa applications for the UK.

Once the applications were submitted, we just had to wait. But time was against us – most family reunification decisions take nine months, but my sons' visas in Saudi Arabia lasted only three. Their passports were being held in the embassy, there was no home for them to return to in Sudan, and we had no idea if they would be granted visas for the UK.

It was so stressful, and life was very difficult for me and my children in the UK.

I had to send half my income to support Khalid and Mazin. We had to rely on food banks in the UK to feed ourselves.

The Red Cross, as well as my local MP, contacted the Home Office, asking them to speed up the decision, but it was too late.

The decision didn't come in time, and the boys were now in Saudi Arabia illegally. If they were caught, they could be imprisoned or deported back to Sudan. To avoid being detained they stayed trapped in their hostel room relying on a neighbour to bring them food and water every few days.

After months of waiting, the advocacy efforts finally paid off and the Home Office agreed to speed up the decisions for Mazin and Khalid. The letter could come at any moment, but there was no guarantee it would be positive.

On the 20th December 2023, we heard the visas had been granted. I was absolutely overjoyed, as were the British Red Cross team who had been supporting me.

It was Christmas, and we had an excruciating wait for flights in January – arranged by the British Red Cross Family Reunion travel assistance team.

But things were still not totally settled. To leave Saudi and travel to the UK, Mazin and Khalid needed to collect their passports with the UK visas in them. But as soon as they engaged with authorities they would be identified as having overstayed. The British Red Cross coordinated with UNHCR to make sure help would be available when they collected their

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passports. Fortunately, they got them back without any issues.

Even then, they still needed permission to leave the country, which would require them to formally register as having overstayed. Without this they would not be able to travel.

They had been told to visit the government office on Tuesday to apply, but when they arrived they were told to come again the next day, but their flight to the UK was leaving the following morning.

After a lot of negotiation, their fingerprints were taken, and they were banned from entering Saudi Arabia for 10 years, but they were given permission to leave.

Finally, they were free to travel.

On the 10th of January 2024, I and my two youngest children, together with British Red Cross Refugee Support staff, were reunited with Mazin and Khalid at Heathrow.

I was so excited. I bought a big box of chocolates and handed them out to everyone in arrivals.

It felt like forever, but finally my boys walked through. We hugged and cried. After four long, hard years apart, our family was together, it felt like my life was able to begin again.

Since we reunited, the British Red Cross Refugee Support team have continued to help us in our new lives. Mazin and Khalid are studying and hoping to start a business together.

Without support from the British Red Cross, and the REPAIR Family Reunification project, I don't know where we would be, none of this would have been possible.”

Images are for illustration only

