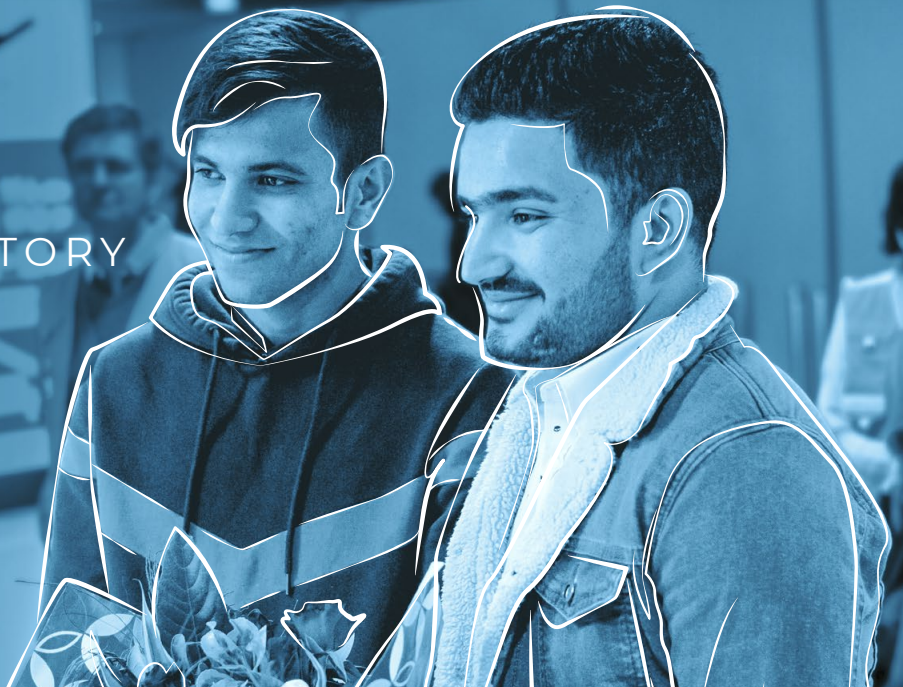


REPAIR PROJECT

FRANCE

KARIM'S STORY



Originally from Afghanistan, Karim* and his family were separated for years while they sought safety. Now reunited in France, the family faces a new struggle to rebuild their lives.

"When I fled Afghanistan in 2015, I had no idea when I would see my wife and children again. Death threats from the Taliban after I refused to financially support them had left me with no choice but to flee.

Scared for my family's safety, I arranged for them to travel to Pakistan with my brother, where they registered as refugees in 2017. Meanwhile, I traveled to France, where I was given subsidiary protection in 2018.

My international protection status allowed me to travel to visit my family in Pakistan, but I didn't know how to apply for family reunification so that we could all live together. Then in 2021, I met the French Red Cross legal team who helped me begin the process.

It took months to collect all our identity documents, screenshots of our calls and messages, proof of

**Name has been changed*

money transfers and family photos. To make things more complicated, our youngest child, Ali, was born in Pakistan, two years after my asylum application was granted in France. Getting identity documents for him was extremely difficult.

Finally, in December 2022, our family reunification application was ready. My French isn't fluent yet, so the French Red Cross helped write an email for my family to schedule an appointment with the French embassy in Pakistan. They were given an appointment for February 1st, 2023.

French visa applications have to be filed in person, so my wife had to travel to Islamabad with all six of our children where they collected their printed application documents from the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

We were so grateful for the help we received from the Red Cross Movement. As well as arranging the appointment, they also printed over two-hundred pages of documents. Without their support my family would have really struggled to submit their application.

I was very anxious about their trip to Islamabad; it cost a lot for everybody to travel and was tough for my wife with all the children but, more critically, with increasing numbers of Afghan families facing deportation and imprisonment, a check-point could have spelled disaster.



This project is funded by the European Union



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

We understand there need to be application procedures, but traveling to embassies, on sometimes long and dangerous journeys, can make the process a real risk for people.

Once our application was submitted, it took four months for us to get an answer. Finally, in June 2023, we were given the green light.

We were overjoyed, but organising my family's journey to France was another major obstacle.

My family never had official residence permits in Pakistan which meant getting exit permits to leave would be a challenge.

The French Red Cross confirmed with the ICRC and UNHCR that my family's refugee cards constituted a valid residence permit in Pakistan, making the government-issued residence permit unnecessary, but the Pakistani authorities disagreed.

The French Red Cross asked the French embassy if they could advocate with the Pakistani authorities for our exit permits. But the embassy said they couldn't help and it was up to us to find a solution.

My brother went to the Migration Bureau in Peshawar where the officer there informed him that to obtain exit permits, my family would need to pay \$3,000. Far beyond our means.

When my brother told me, I was devastated but not surprised: it is not uncommon for foreigners to be told to pay such fees. We went to friends and relatives to try to borrow money to cover the amount being asked.

But when my brother returned to the Bureau, the official he had spoken with was gone and a new officer had taken his place. The second officer demanded \$5,000. He said that, if we paid, he could guarantee my family would board their flight.

What choice did we have? We had to try to find the money.

The officer traveled with my family from Peshawar all the way to the airport in Islamabad. He saw them through security and to the boarding gate, where my wife and children caught their first flight.

I waited all night to hear whether they had boarded the plane, finally my brother confirmed they were on their way.

“

We were so grateful for the help we received from the Red Cross Movement.

At 10 a.m. on June 13, I waited anxiously with three Red Cross helpers for my family to appear through the gates of Terminal 1 at St Exupéry Airport. After eight years, we could finally live together in safety – we were so happy.

But our struggles are not over.

At the moment, eight of us are living in a 30 square meter apartment, a very tight fit for a family with six children – three girls and three boys aged between two and 16.

The French Red Cross has referred us to a social housing service to apply for a bigger apartment, but we don't know if or when we might move.

My wife has applied for her residence permit, but needs to learn French and find professional training before she can begin working. We also need to enroll our children in school and find ways to cover our increased expenses. The kids are really eager to study, to have their own beds, and to learn French so they can make new friends.

We are ready to start our new lives as a family, but the road ahead is long. For new families arriving, it is important to ensure basic essentials like food and housing, but also access to social services, health-care, and education.

These are complicated systems with a lot of paperwork, especially for anyone new to the country.

Families like ours are so happy to be here, and to be together again, but we also face the realities of rebuilding our lives and building a future in a new place.

At the moment we still face many challenges to become self-sufficient, it will take time before we are truly settled in our new community.”

Images are for illustration only