

REPAIR PROJECT

# SLOVENIA

## MOHAMMED'S STORY



***Originally from Syria, Mohammed was in Slovenia for almost two years before being reunited with his family. Although ultimately successful, the reunification process was complicated by administrative delays and requirements which placed challenging demands on Mohammed's wife and children.***

"Before the war we lived in Lebanon where we had our own vegetable shop. We moved back home to Syria, but then the war began. We escaped to Turkey, and ended up living there for nine years.

In Turkey, I was driving a truck and working very long hours, but the conditions got worse and worse. There was a lot of racism, people telling us to go back to our own country – even the kindergarten and schools refused to register our children, that was the final straw.

The first time I tried to leave I was caught by the police. The second time I was smuggled out on a container ship. I told my family that if we were lucky we would meet again and if not to remember that I tried my best for them.

I was in a shipping container for a week, we couldn't even go out to go to the toilet. You can imagine the smell. We felt the container being taken off the ship, but as soon as we came out the port security guards caught us and called the police. Once the police arrived, I immediately asked to claim asylum.

It took nine months to be granted refugee status, and during that time I wasn't allowed to work. People applying for asylum in Slovenian now can work after three months, which is a good change, but too late for me.

Waiting for my asylum decision was so stressful, and even when I got a positive decision, there were new sources of stress with finding a place to live and sorting everything else out. The Red Cross would visit us in the reception centre, so we started to get to know them, and they helped us prepare for our lives outside the centre – they knew where to buy things cheaply, where we could go for psycho-social support and legal advice.

I was so happy when I was allowed to stay in Slovenia, I came straight to the Red Cross to ask for help



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Online Toolkit



Online Report

finding a place to live. We found an apartment and once that was done I began the family reunification process – that was my absolute priority.

In Slovenian law, once you have refugee status you have three months to apply for family reunification. I began collecting and preparing all the documents. Three months after I submitted my application I was told there was a problem: the birthdates on my son's ID and birth certificate were different by eight days.

He was born in Turkey so the correction needed to be made there. I sent the forms off, but then the 2023 earthquake struck and the hospital where my son was born collapsed. The authorities eventually agreed to go ahead without the correction, but my family – who were all still in Turkey – didn't have passports and needed temporary travel documents.

I had to submit birth certificates, marriage certificates, ID papers, everything, to the Slovenian Ministry of the Interior who issued the travel documents and sent them to the Slovenian embassy in Ankara. They have to be collected by all applicants in person, but my family were living in Izmir. My wife had to make a seven-hour each-way journey to the embassy with our two young kids.

Syrian refugees in Turkey need a permit to leave the area where they are registered – getting caught without a permit can mean a big fine, or even deportation. When my wife applied to go to Ankara the permit office said they needed confirmation directly from the Slovenian embassy.

I came to the Red Cross office in Ljubljana and asked for their help calling the migration office at the Slovenian embassy to explain the situation. Initially the embassy was reluctant but finally they agreed and my family got the permit to travel.

After making our application, it was nine months before we received the decision that my family could

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travel to Slovenia. After that we thought we would be together again really soon. We were making plans and thinking about what they should pack, but it doesn't happen like that.

It took another nearly two months before my family arrived. I was worrying they would think I was deliberately delaying and didn't really want them to come. I was constantly calling people and pushing to get my family here as soon as possible. There were times I got frustrated and lost my temper. I was so scared I would lose my family.

The whole process needs to be faster and simpler. It is not humane. And now it has got even more complicated. The authorities know the trouble people face to travel – the cost, the permits. The system can only handle the paperwork that has been created if it is properly resourced. They need to employ enough trained people to manage the bureaucracy.

When my family finally arrived in Slovenia it was the best feeling ever. When you wake up in the morning and your son comes running in and gives you a hug and a kiss and tells you 'Good morning, Daddy!', and to know your family is safe and have this new life together, that's the best feeling in the world."

*Images are for illustration only*