**A one-way "shared" destiny –**

**asylum seekers and refugees during the war in Israel**

**Situation Report**

**December 2023**

**The horrific crimes committed by Hamas on Saturday October 7, 2023 against innocent civilians, including children, women and the elderly are unfathomable, and the pain and grief are immense. The brutal attack by Hamas, and the war that broke out (and continues) in its aftermath, have not differentiated between populations. Among the casualties there are refugees and asylum seekers, injured, bereaved and missing, including three asylum seekers who were murdered by Hamas in Sderot on October 7. In addition, many refugees have evacuated their homes while others are still living in the combat zones**. [**On October 7, Moluguta Tsagai**](https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-775241)**, an asylum seeker from Eritrea, risked his own life and saved the life of Lt. Col. Y. who was hit by Hamas fire. After that accursed Shabbat, the asylum seekers** [**joined the efforts**](https://www.haaretz.co.il/news/education/2023-11-06/ty-article-magazine/0000018b-9ef4-d8a6-a38b-def746f60000) **of civil organizations to help the victims, collecting food donations, helping voluntarily to harvest fruits and vegetables, and more. Tsagai and the other asylum seekers did so out of a true sense of shared destiny with the Israeli society in which they have been living for nearly two decades.** **We must ensure that this partnership will not be one-way, and that while making treatment and assistance accessible, no community, including the community of asylum seekers and refugees, will be left behind.**

Approximately 70,000 asylum seekers, refugees and their children live in Israel today, most of them from Eritrea, Ukraine, and Sudan. They urgently fled their homelands, leaving their families and all their possessions behind, fleeing brutal military rule, wars, genocide, rape, robbery, and murder. They must deal daily with the traumatic aftereffects of the life circumstances from which they escaped, while also battling for survival here in Israel. Asylum seekers and refugees live in Israel legally, under group protection against deportation to their countries of origin, but they are not entitled to social security benefits, state health insurance or most welfare services.

Especially in these difficult days, most of the asylum seekers who apply for and need assistance come from the most vulnerable groups: survivors of torture, people with physical disabilities, those suffering from mental disorders, the sick, those engaged in survival prostitution, homeless, single-parent families, women suffering from domestic violence, teenagers, and minors, and more. Not incidentally, over 52% of those in need of assistance are women.

**These are the main challenges and obstacles that have been discerned among the asylum seeker and refugee communities following the October 7 war**:

* **Exclusion from designated economic aid programs** – as per the data in our possession, it is estimated that approximately 1,000-1,200 asylum seekers from Eritrea and Sudan lived in settlements affected by the conflict in the south of Israel on the eve of the war (mainly in Sderot and Ashkelon). To the best of our knowledge, neither the Government ministries nor the relevant local authorities have complete information on the number of asylum seekers who have vacated their settlements, but according to the information collected by ASSAF and partner organizations, at least 300 of them have left their homes since the outbreak of the war. Notably, those who did so have not received the financial assistance given to Israeli citizens in a similar situation. Today there are two aid programs for those evacuated from conflict zones: [one-time financial aid for those evacuated from settlements up to 7 km from the Gaza Strip](https://www.kolzchut.org.il/he/%D7%9E%D7%A2%D7%A0%D7%A7_%D7%A1%D7%99%D7%95%D7%A2_%D7%9C%D7%94%D7%AA%D7%90%D7%A8%D7%92%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%AA_%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%A9%D7%95%D7%A0%D7%99%D7%AA_%D7%9C%D7%AA%D7%95%D7%A9%D7%91%D7%99_%D7%A2%D7%95%D7%98%D7%A3_%D7%A2%D7%96%D7%94_%D7%A2%D7%A7%D7%91_%D7%9E%D7%9C%D7%97%D7%9E%D7%AA_%D7%97%D7%A8%D7%91%D7%95%D7%AA_%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%96%D7%9C) (aid of 1,000 NIS per person and a ceiling of 5,000 NIS per family), and [extended financial aid for evacuees from the south and the north](https://www.kolzchut.org.il/he/%D7%9E%D7%A2%D7%A0%D7%A7_%D7%90%D7%9B%D7%9C%D7%95%D7%A1_%D7%9C%D7%AA%D7%95%D7%A9%D7%91%D7%99%D7%9D_%D7%A9%D7%94%D7%AA%D7%A4%D7%A0%D7%95_%D7%9E%D7%91%D7%99%D7%AA%D7%9D_%D7%91%D7%AA%D7%A7%D7%95%D7%A4%D7%AA_%D7%9E%D7%9C%D7%97%D7%9E%D7%AA_%D7%97%D7%A8%D7%91%D7%95%D7%AA_%D7%91%D7%A8%D7%96%D7%9C) - in sum of 200 NIS per day for an adult and 100 NIS per day for a child. Neither of these two programs are accessible to asylum seekers who lived in and evacuated from relevant settlements.
* **Loss of income and the absence of an economic and social safety net -** the economic distress of asylum seekers and refugees is increasing. As mentioned previously, these groups are virtually unentitled to almost all social and health services, primarily social security benefits, state health insurance and most welfare services. In addition, it should be noted that within two months after the outbreak of the war, many of the asylum seekers and refugees lost their jobs in restaurants, shopping malls, and other places, either because the employer closed the business because of the war, or because they were forced out or fired because of the situation. For the asylum seeker community, the loss of a job means not only a lack of livelihood but also the loss of health insurance (a private health insurance guaranteed to them by law at the expense of the employers). Many asylum seekers did not receive any salary at all for the month of October or what they did receive was greatly reduced.

It is expected that the longer the crisis lasts, the greater the deterioration of the asylum seekers' economic situation will be. Nutritional insecurity, which is already rampant among these communities, will increase even more, as will the lack of basic products, including diapers and baby formula, and there will be more and more cases of people who will not be able to pay the rent and will be forced to leave their homes.

* **Lack of access to safe dwellings -** asylum seekers who are residents of the south were not spared from shelling by Hamas. Some of them evacuated, and thanks to civil society organizations, activists, and citizens, received shelter in other places in Israel, although after about 7 weeks, more and more of them have started receiving notices that their hosts – local communities and private individuals - would not be able to continue hosting them without payment. Thus, asylum seekers from Ashkelon who evacuated to the town of Nitzana when the war broke out, were reluctantly forced to return to Ashkelon (which is shelled almost daily), because the town could not continue to host them for free. In the absence of Government aid (which Ashkelon evacuees who lack safe-rooms and are Israeli citizens do receive), it goes without saying that asylum seekers are unable to pay for their accommodations.
* **Lack of access to shelters and safe-rooms -** most asylum seekers in Israel do not have access to shelters or reinforced safety rooms ("safe-rooms"). They often live in crowded apartments located in old and frail buildings in impoverished neighborhoods. Many attest that no shelters are available close enough to their places of residence to make them relevant.
* **Accelerated deterioration in mental health -** Saturday October 7, 2023 was one of the most frightening and traumatic days in the history of Israel. Asylum seekers survived severe trauma, wars, genocide, and other atrocities that forced them to leave their homes and seek asylum in Israel. Many of them were victims of human trafficking and brutal torture. For them, the brutal attack by Hamas means reliving the trauma, making the difficulty of coping with the war doubled and compounded. This is how M., an Eritrean asylum seeker, who fled from Ashkelon with his wife and daughters after a direct hit by a rocket on the apartment where they lived (until October 7) described their situation:

*"For my wife it brought back memories of the past. She can't function and doesn't sleep at night. My daughters are also afraid and won't leave the house ... At first, we lived with friends who live in Or Yehuda. We slept on the floor there. But we didn't stay there because my girls were scared and vomited every time there was a rocket alarm."*

As of today, M. and his family have yet to receive compensation for their property that was damaged in the shelling and financial aid for expenses resulting from their need to evacuate, with the exception of an initial payment for their stay at a hotel in Ashkelon immediately after the shelling. As for emotional assistance, even during regular times, asylum seekers in Israel have limited access to mental health services, and these days they have become nearly non-existent.

**All the aforementioned increases the risk that, following the war, the communities of refugees and asylum seekers, already weakened and vulnerable, will find themselves in a severe humanitarian crisis, as happened during the Corona pandemic. The State of Israel must include the communities of asylum seekers and refugees in the economic programs, grants, programs for professional conversion and training, and other special programs being offered to Israeli citizens and other communities.**

**The government should:**

* **Map all the needs of evacuees who are members in the asylum seeker communities.**
* **Map humanitarian issues related to the economic crisis that is severely affecting these communities and build a tailored intervention plan to reduce the humanitarian distress that they are experiencing as quickly as possible.**
* **Include asylum seekers and refugees in all the aid programs, including:**

**-** All economic emergency plans that are intended to help employees affected by the war and the slowing of the economy which is one of its results. It is also critical to make health services accessible to asylum seekers to ensure their ability to receive medical care regardless of their employment status.

**-** The two aforementioned aid programs: one-time financial aid for those evacuated from settlements up to 7 km from the Gaza Strip, and extended financial aid for evacuees from the south and the north.

**-** [Vocational training programs](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dry36wDGMbqS65gQ-2iTXTnlCtq0ooVK1p-YMbQ_kHA/edit) designed to fill vacancies in essential jobs in the economy (among them, fields such as agriculture, the hospitality industry, and education), including [programs](https://www.themarker.com/career/2023-11-08/ty-article/0000018b-af30-d3c1-a39b-bff10dc70000) that provide financial incentives to workers who are willing to transfer to work in the needed professions.

**Just as wars and epidemics do not distinguish between people's civil status, origin, nationality, religion, or color, so too the State of Israel should provide protection to all those affected by the war. The shared destiny with those who have been living among us for nearly 20 years must not be one-way - Israel must ensure that all those who were harmed on October 7 and in the Iron Swords war - including asylum seeker communities - are cared for and rehabilitated.**

For further details:

Orly Levinson-Sela, ASSAF - Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel, [orly@assaf.org.il](orly%40assaf.org.il), +972-50-6232586

Hadar Aviel, ASSAF - Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel, [hadar@assaf.org.il](hadar%40assaf.org.il), +972-50-6874887