



110th World Day of Migrants & Refugees



The Archdiocese of Toronto commemorated the 110th World Day of Migrants & Refugees at a special Mass that was celebrated at St. Catherine of Siena Catholic Church in Mississauga, Ontario. His Excellency, Most Reverend Ivan Camilleri presided over the Mass and delivered the homily. The parish community came together to pray for those suffering as migrants and refugees, with general intercessions offered by parishioners in their traditional attire and native languages.

After the Mass, the parish hosted a delightful reception where community members shared traditional foods from their diverse cultural backgrounds.

We extend our heartfelt thanks to Bishop Camilleri, Fr. Gabriel Martinez, pastor of St. Catherine of Siena, Sr. Noemia Silva, Chair of the parish's refugee committee, and to all those who contributed to this beautiful occasion of prayer and solidarity.



Preparations for 2025

We are pleased to announce that we have completed our submissions for 2024, having used the entirety of the allocation provided to us by Immigration Canada. In total, we have sponsored 676 refugees this year or 306 families

We anticipate that Immigration Canada will announce its 2025 allocation to Sponsorship Agreement Holders (SAHs) by the end of February 2025. Once this announcement is made, SAHs will be permitted to submit cases without restriction to Immigration Canada. In advance of this announcement, we are taking active steps to ready cases for submission.

As part of these preparatory efforts, ORAT has begun to register cases through our Constituent Group Partner Organizations (CGPOs), conducting information sessions and establishing deadlines for cosponsors to submit their completed paperwork to ORAT. This planning ensures that we are able to submit cases as soon as our allocation is announced.



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Preparations for 2025

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We also offer a program for members of the General Public who wish to sponsor their relatives for resettlement to Canada. We encourage those who are interested in the General Public Program, to monitor our website (www.orat.ca). We will announce the details of the online registration 1-2 weeks prior to the start of the registration.

We are committed to keeping our program participants informed and will announce the receipt of our 2025 allocation.

Thank you for your interest and participation in this program.

The 2024 National SAH Conference



The National SAH Conference is an annual gathering of Sponsorship Agreement Holder (SAH) organizations across Canada providing them a platform to engage with government representatives and officials from Immigration Canada. During the conference, SAHs were

provided the opportunity to discuss matters related to the resettlement of refugees in Canada. The conference participants work to strengthen Canada's refugee sponsorship program, to build relationship among program partners, and to strengthen Canada's Private Sponsorship of Refugees program.

Sponsors networked, received program information updates from Immigration Canada and shared their concerns. There was also the opportunity for participants to exchange of ideas, best practices, knowledge and resources, while receiving training to solve existing refugee program challenges.

The 2024 National SAH Conference took place in Toronto from Wednesday October 2, 2024, to Friday October 4, 2024.

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Crisis in Lebanon



We are deeply concerned by the ongoing conflict and deteriorating conditions in Lebanon. During the annual SAH Conference, many SAHs expressed their concerns to IRCC and inquired about the possibility of expedited processing for sponsored refugees in Lebanon.

IRCC clarified that, at this time, there are no changes to processing times specifically related to Lebanon. However, expedited processing may be considered for case-specific issues that meet one of the following conditions:

- Imminent danger to personal safety or life.
- Risk of refoulement, deportation, or detention.
- Exceptional situations identified by a SAH that go beyond the typical vulnerabilities for refugee applicants (e.g., a life-threatening medical condition requiring urgent care that is not available in the country of asylum).

If you believe your case meets any of the above criteria, we encourage you to contact us for further assistance at oratcases@archtoronto.org.

EDUCATION CORNER

Country Report: Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a landlocked country located at the crossroads of Central and South Asia. It is bordered by Pakistan to the east and south, Iran to the west, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan to the north, and China to the far northeast through a narrow strip known as the Wakhan Corridor. This strategic location has made Afghanistan a historical hub for trade, cultural exchange, and military conquests, serving as a gateway between the Indian subcontinent, Central Asia, and the Middle East.

The country's geography is dominated by rugged

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mountains, particularly the Hindu Kush range, which stretches through the central region, as well as desert and plains to the southwest. Afghanistan's location has played a critical role in its historical significance, as it has long been a center for empires, invasions, and trade routes, such as the ancient Silk Road. This strategic position, while bringing wealth and cultural diversity, has also made it a focal point of geopolitical struggles throughout history.



Geo-historical context: Afghanistan's geo-historical context is defined by its strategic location at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and the Middle East. Throughout history, this position made Afghanistan a key hub along the ancient Silk Road, facilitating trade and cultural exchange between empires such as Persia, India, and China. It has been a meeting point for civilizations, religions, and cultures, which enriched its cultural fabric but also made it a target for numerous invasions, from Alexander the Great's conquest in the 4th century BC to the Islamic Caliphates in the 7th century, and later the Mongol invasions in the 13th century. Afghanistan has been shaped by the ebb and flow of empires. Its rugged geography, dominated by the Hindu Kush mountains, has also made it a challenging region for conquerors to control, fostering a fiercely independent and tribal culture.

In the modern era, Afghanistan's location has placed it at the center of great power rivalries, particularly during the 19th-century "Great Game" between the British Empire and Tsarist Russia.

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Refugee Sponsorship Experience

St. Benedict's Parish, Halifax, Nova Scotia



In the Fall of 2019, our Pastor, Father Simon Lobo, CC, of Saint Benedict Parish in Halifax, Nova Scotia, was looking for different ways our parish could expand our outreach activities. He asked the Parish MEN's ministry to investigate the possibility of sponsoring a family, establishing a team and facilitate the settlement. In January 2020 parishioners donated sufficient funds for sponsorship. Our Archdiocese did not have any families available at the time, however the Office for Refugees, Archdiocese of Toronto (ORAT) did have a family we could sponsor. ORAT and Immigration Canada accepted our Parish application as a sponsor. We were advised it could take up to three years before the family would be able to arrive and that once approved by Immigration Canada, we may have as little as three weeks before they arrive.

We developed a team of fourteen parishioners comprising of a diverse group of women and men, with backgrounds in teaching, counseling, medicine, finance, carpentry, business and more. ORAT provided us with settlement information, guidelines, a list of resources and training. We established a team for each major settlement tasks including: Housing, Transportation, Culture & Language, Medical, School & Benefits, Banking, Utilities & Employment, Shopping & Cooking and Budget Management. Each member of the team joined 2 to 3 different task teams that best matched their skills and experience.



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Both sought to control Afghanistan as a buffer state in their struggle for regional dominance. In the 20th century, Afghanistan's geopolitical importance persisted, culminating in the Soviet invasion in 1979, which was part of the broader Cold War conflict. The subsequent decades of conflict—including the rise of the Taliban in the 1990s and the U.S.-led intervention following the 9/11 attacks—were influenced by its location, which made it a focal point for international power struggles.

Afghanistan's geography has also contributed to its fragmented political landscape. The difficult terrain, particularly the mountainous regions, has long enabled local tribes and ethnic groups to maintain autonomy from central authority. This decentralized structure, combined with the impact of foreign interventions, has made it difficult to establish a stable and unified state. Today, Afghanistan remains a land rich in cultural diversity and history, but its location continues to make it a geopolitical hotspot, as global powers vie for influence in the region.

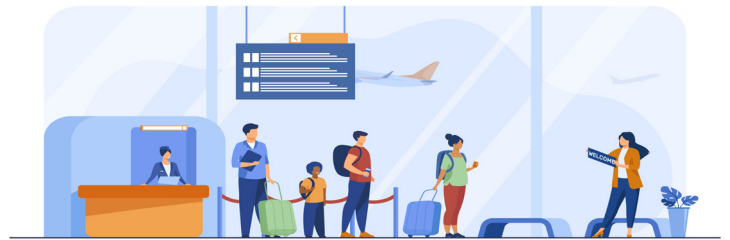
Religious Affiliation: Afghanistan is predominantly an Islamic country, with the vast majority of its population adhering to Sunni Islam, specifically the Hanafi school of jurisprudence. Sunni Muslims make up about 85-90% of the population, reflecting the country's deep-rooted connection to Islamic traditions, which have shaped Afghan culture, law, and society since the Arab Muslim conquests in the 7th century.

A significant minority, around 10-15%, of the population are Shia Muslims, primarily of the Twelver sect. The Shia community is concentrated among the Hazara ethnic group, particularly in the central highlands of Afghanistan. There are also smaller religious minorities, including a few Hindus, Sikhs, and Christians, though their numbers have drastically diminished due to decades of conflict and migration. Islam remains a central pillar of Afghan identity, influencing daily life, social norms, and political structures.

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After developing a detailed settlement plan, we then prioritized which tasks could be done in advance and then the steps and timeline for the remaining. A lot of preparation was done in advance so we would know all the issues when the time came to implement the plan. Due to Covid-19, we did most of our meetings on Zoom until it was safe to meet in person. This was key as when we got the notice the family would be arriving in three months, we were ready to implement our plans. Most of the many tasks would have to be completed in the first few weeks, a lot of advice had to be given to the family so they could make the best decision on the things they wanted to do.

Soon after we received confirmation that the family would be arriving, we were given their contact



information. We contacted them on the WHATSAPP online video and messaging system. This allowed us an opportunity to get to know them and for them to get to know us. They had a lot of questions about Halifax and what it would be like to live here, the weather and how much everything would cost. We had a long list of questions too. We had only two months remaining before they arrived. We needed to find out details of their current language abilities, schooling, sizes for their clothing and footwear, if they had any food sensitivities or allergies, hobbies, cultural and religious traditions and work experiences and qualifications, any health or mobility issues, what documentation they would be bringing with them and if they had any electronic communication devices. We also asked what food staples they would like to have ready for them in their kitchen when they arrived. They only owned one android cell phone, that would not work in Canada, and everything they owned including clothing fit into one bag when they arrived.

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Refugee Outflow: Afghanistan has experienced significant refugee outflows over the past several decades due to persistent conflict, political instability, and economic hardship. The Soviet invasion in 1979 triggered one of the largest refugee crises in modern history, with millions fleeing to neighboring countries, particularly Pakistan and Iran. During this period, Afghan refugees formed the largest refugee population in the world, as people sought to escape the violence of the Soviet-Afghan war and the subsequent civil war in the 1990s. Many remained in exile for years, with some even settling in third countries such as the U.S., Canada, and parts of Europe. The rise of the Taliban in the mid-1990s and their repressive regime led to further displacement, as Afghans fled to avoid persecution, particularly women and ethnic minorities like the Hazaras.

The U.S.-led invasion in 2001, following the 9/11 attacks, initially resulted in some refugees returning, as hopes for a more stable Afghanistan rose. However, as the conflict with the Taliban and other insurgent groups persisted, displacement continued. The Taliban's resurgence and eventual takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, after the withdrawal of U.S. and NATO forces, triggered another large-scale refugee exodus. Tens of thousands of Afghans, especially those who worked with international forces, civil society, or as journalists, sought asylum abroad, fearing persecution under the new regime.

The ongoing humanitarian crisis, compounded by economic collapse, has left millions internally displaced and continues to fuel outflows of refugees, with Pakistan, Iran, and Western countries remaining key destinations for those seeking safety.

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Our biggest obstacle was housing. Halifax, like most cities in Canada welcomed thousands of immigrants during 2022 and apartments were scarce, let alone a 3-bedroom lower cost apartment needed for our large family. Rents increased rapidly before we received our family, Renters were not leaving their 3-bedroom apartments, because 2-bedroom apartments would cost them more. Fortunately, our prayers were answered when a friend of a parishioner, who owned a rental home nearby that became vacant, offered us a below market rental cost until something became available. This was secured one week before the family arrived. It took us another eighteen months to find a 3-bedroom apartment for them, and the family moved in last June 2024. The children are all able to attend the same schools and public transportation is only 100 feet from their door.

We also use local resources such as the Immigration Services Associations Nova Scotia, (ISANS), that was very helpful with information for the family to participate in the Newcomers Family Health Clinic, so all the family had a doctor. They also recommended other eye doctors and dentists. ISANS also provided free bus passes for the first year for each family member.

The Lord was with us throughout our settlement journey. Our Refugee Outreach Team was awesome. We were successful in getting ninety percent of the tasks done within one month of the family's arrival due to the planning we did in advance. Requests for in kind donations and help with tasks were all answered quickly by parishioners.

It was not an easy task when it came to housing, which was mentioned earlier. Also, one member of the family, who was not able to read and write in English, wanted to work before learning. We had to wait for a ISANS English class vacancy, which never did happen.



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ORAT's Support: ORAT has submitted sponsorship applications for 348 Afghan refugees. Notably, 30% of these applications were submitted in 2022 and 2023 under the Operation Afghan Safety (OAS) Program. This program supports Afghan nationals who can demonstrate that they fled their country due to their membership in one of the following vulnerable groups: persecuted religious minorities, human rights defenders, women leaders, and journalists.

To date, 111 refugees have successfully arrived in Canada, while 234 others are in various stages of processing.

Refugee Sponsorship Experience

St. Benedict's Parish, Halifax, Nova Scotia

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We ended up one on one tutoring with volunteers, paid tutoring and now she is taking online digital English lessons which are going well.

Housing and English training were the most difficult tasks, and when we get our next family, we will do our best to prepare using our experience. Our refugee family had lived in a refugee camp for nine years and the move to Halifax was a huge culture shock to them in learning to take care of a home, time management and having responsibilities. After a couple of weeks, the family developed Family Rules, and a picture of the same rules is still hanging in their kitchen.

ORAT was always only a call away whenever we had any questions or needed advice. We all felt very blessed to be able to help our refugee family settle in Halifax, it was a joyful experience. We celebrated with the family after the one-year mark with a potluck supper at our Church. Each family member was asked what the toughest obstacle in their move to Halifax was, and each one said it was the weather, and each gave examples, we all had a good heartfelt laugh.

ORAT Benefactors



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