

Afghan surgeon who fled Ukraine says he was treated differently at Polish border

'I'm not blond,' says Ruhullah Haji, who was stuck at crossing for three days but managed to join family in UK



Heart surgeon Ruhulla Haji, who escaped war in his home country, Afghanistan, settled in Odesa and is now in Blackpool awaiting a decision on his UK asylum application.

Geneva Abdul
Thu 19 May 2022

Born in Kabul, Afghanistan, and later building a life in Ukraine, Ruhullah Haji has been displaced by war twice in 34 years.

So when the heart surgeon made it to Britain after fleeing Russia's invasion, he was desperate for security and the right to remain as a Ukrainian. Many other Afghans have struggled to secure such rights since the fall of Kabul last year, and remain in limbo.

Haji's application to the Ukrainian family scheme was accepted on Thursday, about a month after he applied and a day after the Guardian approached the Home Office about his case.

However, his lawyer said a decision for his wife and daughter has yet to come.

It marks the end of a long and arduous road. A week after Ukraine was invaded in February, Haji crossed the Polish border alone in search of his wife and child who had already fled. At the border, he said he was treated differently. Other BAME refugees have reported similar experiences.

“Because they [volunteers] saw me: that I’m not white and I don’t have green eyes and I’m not blond,” said Haji, who waited at the border for three days with no belongings. “But ... I serve for Ukraine more than [many] Ukrainians.”

He then travelled by train from Poland through Romania, Hungary, Austria and Germany over two days in search of his family, before flying to the UK. “I couldn’t sleep, I couldn’t eat, I couldn’t drink, I was just walking and running, in two days,” he said.

Haji had left Afghanistan for Ukraine in his teens to join his older brother. He studied Russian, adding a seventh language to his arsenal, and completed his medical degree to become a heart surgeon. He also held language classes for more than 100 Afghan refugees, worked as a refugee doctor across the Odesa region where the family lived, and later founded a clinic of his own.

After reuniting with his family in Britain in March, they visited the Home Office and the following day were sent to a hotel in Blackpool to await news of their asylum application.

Haji’s solicitor, Nicola Burgess of the Greater Manchester Immigration Aid Unit, has been helping Haji’s family, and others who have applied for asylum, switch to existing Ukrainian schemes.

Burgess recognises that without the Ukrainian scheme, the family would be stuck in a hotel without the right to work – the experience of many Afghans. “If you just had to flee a war zone, you have been subjected to trauma. And if you’re stuck in a box room hotel, it is going to have a negative effect on a person.”

The Ukraine schemes have operated with significant delays. Burgess said: “Ruhullah is a refugee automatically, it should be a more straightforward process ... They’re fleeing a war zone, there should be an automatic grant of some type of leave to remain rather than some drawn-out process.”

Haji walks and jogs to stay motivated. He has started visiting a nearby library to keep on top of his studies, and the British Medical Association has recently accepted his credentials.

“Of course, I would like to go back, but now I’m a father and I have my small child, I should think about my family more than myself, than about my people who cannot live under the bombs, because we have as Afghans, we have this experience,” Haji said. “In war there is no loser, there is no winner.”

A UK government spokesperson said that after launching one of the “fastest and biggest visa schemes in the UK history”, over 102,000 visas for Ukrainians to live and work in the UK have been granted.

“The changes the Home Office has made to streamline the visa system, including simplifying the forms and boosting staff numbers, are working and we are now processing visas as quickly as they come in – enabling thousands more Ukrainians to come through our uncapped routes.”