
One thousand Ukrainians in Japan, an exceptional occurrence for a traditionally closed society

(Tokyo) – “We will accept Ukrainians with relatives or acquaintances in Japan, but beyond that, we will respond from a humanitarian perspective”, Premier Fumio Kishida said on March 2, six days after the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Since then and up to mid-May, some 1,000 Ukrainians have been taken in by Japan, the government also helped them with their relocation and living expenses by providing financial support, while local administrations and private companies contributed to finding accommodation, school placement for the children of evacuated families, as well as language courses and job opportunities. Furthermore, the Kishida Cabinet is studying the possibility of introducing a special “quasi-refugee” status for Ukrainian displaced persons into its legal system. with a view to simplifying the complex procedural rules that make the granting of “refugee status” in the Country extremely difficult. Faced with this renewed commitment to welcoming refugees, some commentators noted that it was the first time that displaced foreign nationals were so favourably accepted in Japan, which in fact is far from being defined as an open society. Such humanitarian impetus towards the Ukrainian people brought renewed focus on Japan's refugee reception system, marked by unequal attitudes and treatment towards refugees from countries other than Ukraine, such as Myanmar. The Catholic Church of Japan equally voiced its stance on the issue in a Message entitled “Establishing an Inclusive and Equitable Refugee Protection System.” The document, published on May 27 on the website of the [Bishops' Conference of Japan](#), and signed by the Bishop of Saitama Mario Michiaki Yamanouchi, president of the Catholic Commission of Japan for Migrants, Refugees and People on the Move, addressed the question with the “intention of promoting a more equitable and unequivocal comprehensive management” of a problem that involves all refugees in Japan. In the wake of the government's efforts, Monsignor Yamanouchi writes, “We are very pleased with this and we hope that progress towards building a favourable environment for Ukrainian refugees living in Japan will continue. - yet adding next – However, the refugees from Ukraine are not the only ones in need of assistance.” The document goes on to point out that Japan is “nowhere near meeting international standards” in terms of the granting of 'refugee' status, which leaves many people “in a precarious situation, forced to live in fear of detention or repatriation.” Official data provided by Immigration Authorities confirm this reality. In almost 40 years - from 1982 to 2020 - only 849 out of 85,479 asylum seekers have been granted refugee status, with only 47 out of 3,936 in 2020. One of the main factors behind this situation is the restrictive interpretation given by the Japanese Immigration Agency to Article 1A of the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the status of refugees, albeit set in a totally different historical context compared to that of today. The Catholic Committee for Refugees, having recalled Pope Francis's address to young people in November 2019, on the occasion of his apostolic journey to Japan, where he asked them “to extend the hand of friendship to those who come here, often after great sufferings, seeking refuge in your country”, concludes its Message with an appeal to public authorities: “We seize this occasion marked by the reception of Ukrainian refugees,” writes the President, Msgr Yamanouchi, “to encourage and request the establishment of an appropriate and comprehensive refugee protection system that provides for the reception of all those in need of assistance.”

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