

## The UK's role in the international refugee protection system

June 2016

At the end of 2015 the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide had risen to 65.3 million, 5.8 million more than at the end of 2014. This is the first time ever that the figure has topped 60 million. The increased numbers reflect the on going crisis in Syria, but also new or reignited conflicts in Burundi, Iraq, Libya, Niger, and Nigeria and older unresolved conflicts in Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Central African Republic, South Sudan, Ukraine and Yemen, among others. The combined number of refugees and internally displaced persons protected or assisted by UNHCR reached a record high of 52.6 million by the end of 2015.

Within the overall total 16.1 million were refugees under the mandate of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), in addition to 3.2 million asylum seekers worldwide. The figure for refugees does not include Palestinian refugees, of whom 5.2 million are registered with UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency).

Most refugees flee to neighbouring countries and remain in their region of origin. At the end of 2015 Africa and the Middle East hosted about 44% of all refugees (7.15 million refugees) while Europe hosted about 27% (approximately 4.4 million refugees). The number of refugees in Europe increased by 43% during 2015. More than 1.2 million asylum applications were received in the EU during 2015. The main countries of origin were Syria (675,700), Afghanistan (406,300), and Iraq (253,600). Ukraine accounted for almost 150,000 applications in the Russian Federation during 2015 which was a sharp decrease from 2014 (274,700).

During the second half of 2015 there was a dramatic increase in the number of refugees and migrants arriving in Europe by sea. Overall more than 1 million people arrived in this way, compared with 216,000 in 2014. The rise was mostly increased movement across the Mediterranean to Greece. About half of these people came from Syria, but there were also significant numbers from Afghanistan and Iraq. There were also thousands of people who died or were reported missing during these crossings.

Turkey has remained 1<sup>st</sup> in the rankings of refugee hosting countries, having been 59<sup>th</sup> just four years ago, because of the number of Syrian refugees entering the country. There are now 2.5 million refugees in Turkey. During 2015 there were just under 1 million Syrian refugees newly registered in Turkey. Lebanon and Jordan remain high in the rankings, again because of the impact of the conflict in Syria.

Pakistan is the country hosting the second largest number of refugees (1.6 million) followed by Lebanon (1.1 million), Iran (979,400), Ethiopia (736,100) and Jordan (664,100).

In comparison, according to UNHCR, the UK hosts about 169,100 refugees and asylum seekers. UNHCR has revised this figure downwards by a considerable amount since 2011 when they quoted a total figure of 208,000. The change reflects a fall in the UNHCR estimate of the number of refugees in the UK from 193,600 to 123,100.

More than three quarters of all refugees worldwide came from just ten countries. The top three in the list at the end of 2015 were: Syria (about 4.9 million), Afghanistan (about 2.7 million), and Somalia (about 1.1 million). South Sudan (about 0.78 million), Sudan (about 0.63 million), and Democratic Republic of the Congo (about 0.54 million) were the next highest numbers. Syria replaced Afghanistan as the main country of origin in 2014, having been 36<sup>th</sup> in the list just four years earlier. Previously Afghanistan was the main country of origin for over three decades.

Women and girls accounted for 47% of the world's refugee population in 2015, a proportion that has remained fairly constant over the past decade. 51% of the refugee population in 2015 were children under the age of 18. Only 3% were over 60 years old. Over 98,000 asylum applications were made in 2015 by unaccompanied or separated children, mainly from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Syria, and Somalia. This is the highest number since UNHCR started collecting this data in 2006.

Globally about 3.2 million individual asylum claims were pending determination at the end of 2015, according to UNHCR. Across the EU over recent years there was a steady rise in the number of asylum applications from 2007 to 2013, with 2010 being an exception to the trend. There were much larger increases in 2014, and particularly in 2015. Total new applications, including dependants, to the EU28 countries have risen from 225,150 in 2008 to 1,321,600 in 2015. Some Western European countries, such as Sweden and Germany, have seen large increases in asylum applications over the period. In Germany, for example, numbers have risen from 26,845 in 2008 to 476,510 in 2015.

In the UK the number of asylum applications has remained relatively stable in recent years, compared with the very large changes in some countries, ranging from a low of 17,916 in 2010 to a high of 32,414 in 2015. (All these UK figures exclude dependants). In 2015 there were significant increases in the number of applications from Iraq (2,185 main applicants in 2015 compared with 588 in 2014), Sudan (2,918 main applicants in 2015 compared with 1,449 in 2013), and Afghanistan (2,240 main applicants in 2015 compared with 1,139 in 2014). The number of applicants from Syria rose again in 2015 by 29% compared with 2014.

UNHCR data also examines the number of refugees per 1000 population. The effect of the Syrian crisis can again be seen. Lebanon has 183 refugees per 1000 population and Jordan 87 per 1000. These figures do not include Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA. When the refugees registered with UNRWA in Lebanon are included the figure for Lebanon rises to about 1 in 4 of the population. The last time a country was in a similar situation was in 1980, when Somalia hosted 2 million refugees from Ethiopia, giving a ratio of over 300 refugees per 1000 inhabitants. The comparable figure for the UK is less than 2 per 1000.

In 2015 the EU28 (EU member states) granted protection to 307,470 asylum seekers, an increase from 167,385 in 2014. The largest national group was from Syria (162,090). In the UK the largest national groups granted protection were from Eritrea, Syria, Sudan, and Iran.

## **Resettlement**

Under the Gateway Protection Programme the UK has set a quota of up to 750 refugees to settle in the UK each year. This is separate from the standard procedure for claiming asylum in the UK. Applications are made via UNHCR offices in other countries, which then refer them to the UK Home Office. At present 15 local authorities are participating in the Gateway programme. During the first year a refugee is in the UK the local authority is given funds by the Home Office to cover accommodation, welfare benefits, and access to health and education services. In 2015 there were 652 refugees, including dependants, resettled via the Gateway programme in the UK. The European share of resettlement places is modest; the United States, Australia, and Canada together accounted for almost 90% of those resettled in 2015. Globally only 107,100 were resettled in 2015.

The Mandate Resettlement Scheme is designed to resettle people who have been recognised as refugees by UNHCR and have a close family member who is willing to accommodate them. The numbers are considerably lower than in the Gateway Programme. In 2015 the UK accepted 18 people through the Mandate scheme.

In January 2014 the Home Secretary announced a programme to provide emergency protection in the UK for displaced Syrians who are particularly vulnerable. The Vulnerable Person Relocation Scheme is targeted at individuals for whom evacuation from the region is the only option. Priority is given to survivors of torture and violence, and women and children at risk or in need of medical care. This programme is additional to the Gateway and Mandate schemes. No annual quota was set for this scheme although the Home Office anticipated that several hundred people would be relocated and supported in the period 2014-16 and in September 2015 the Prime Minister announced that the scheme would be expanded to resettle 20,000 Syrians by 2020. The actual number in 2015 was 1,194, compared with 143 in 2014.

In 2016 the government announced a scheme to identify and bring 'children at risk' from the Middle East and North Africa (often referred to as 'MENA'). No children have yet arrived under this scheme but further details can be found in Ministerial Statements made in [January](#) and [April](#).

## **Interception measures**

The UK has a network of Immigration Liaison Managers overseas. They focus on locations which have been identified as major sources, or transit points, for inadequately documented passengers. ILMs have no legal powers when working overseas; they cannot arrest anyone, and cannot instruct an airline to refuse to allow a passenger to board. However their advice will lead to airlines taking action such as this. All carriers, airlines and shipping companies are liable to a charge of £2000 for every inadequately documented person they carry to the UK. Immigration officers based at Dover are also posted to rail and ferry ports in France and Belgium as part of the measures to control irregular migration.

Frontex, the EU external borders agency, also plays a role in intercepting irregular migrants. Frontex constitutes a development of the Schengen agreements, so the UK is not bound by the regulations governing it. However the UK has been involved in a number of Frontex-led operations, including within the UK. In 2015 Frontex detected about 1,822,000 illegal border crossings at the EU external borders, the highest ever figure, and six times more than in 2014, which had been the previous highest figure

and a very large increase from 2013 (107,000). According to Frontex most detections occurred in the Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkan areas. In the Eastern Mediterranean most detections were on the Greek islands of the Aegean Sea, and Syrians accounted for the majority of arrivals. The detections on the western Balkan route were mostly on the borders of Serbia with Hungary and Croatia. Many of the people involved had travelled from a Greek island and had then left the EU to travel via Macedonia and Serbia.

Frontex does not provide a breakdown of whether those intercepted wished to seek protection, although their Annual Risk Analysis 2015 specifically said that many migrants move to the EU with the intention of claiming asylum and to escape the violence in their own country.

## **Sources of Statistics**

UNHCR Global Trends 2015:

<http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/576408cd7.pdf>

Eurostat:

[http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database?node\\_code=tps00191](http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database?node_code=tps00191)

Home Office Statistics:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-january-to-march-2016-data-tables>

Frontex:

<http://frontex.europa.eu/>

## **About the Refugee Council**

The Refugee Council is one of the leading organisations in the UK working with asylum seekers and refugees. We give help and support to asylum seekers and refugees, and also work with them to ensure their needs and concerns are addressed by decision-makers.

British Refugee Council, (commonly called the Refugee Council) is a company limited by guarantee registered in England and Wales, [No 2727514] and a registered charity, [No 1014576].

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