

The UK's role in the international refugee protection system

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At the end of 2013 the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide had risen to 51.2 million, 6 million more than at the end of 2012, and 8.3 million more than at the end of 2011. The increased numbers reflect the on going crisis in Syria, but also in 2013 significant numbers of people were displaced in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, the Central African Republic, and the border area between Sudan and South Sudan. Within the overall total 11.7 million were refugees under the mandate of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), in addition to 1.2 million asylum seekers worldwide. The figure for refugees does not include Palestinian refugees, of whom 5.0 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 2013 Africa and the Middle East hosted about 47% of all refugees (5.5 million refugees) while Europe hosted about 15% (approximately 1.8 million refugees). The number of refugees in Europe remained static compared with 2012. However this was because two major changes offset each other in 2013. Turkey received about 478,000 Syrian refugees, of which some 140,800 spontaneously returned to Syria during the year. An additional 37,800 Syrian refugees were granted international protection on an individual basis in various European countries. On the other hand the UNHCR estimate of the number of refugees in Germany was revised downwards from 589,700 at the beginning of 2013 to 187,600. This was because of an alignment in the definitions used by UNHCR to count refugees to correspond with those used by the Government of Germany.

Turkey has risen to 5th in the rankings of refugee hosting countries, having been 59th just two years ago, because of the number of Syrian refugees entering the country. Lebanon and Jordan have both moved up the rankings, again because of the impact of the conflict in Syria. Pakistan is the country hosting the single largest number of refugees (over 1.6 million) followed by Iran (857,400), Lebanon (856,400), Jordan (641,900), Turkey (609,900), and Kenya (534,900). Germany has dropped out of the top 10 because of the redefinition of numbers, as has Syria because of a significant downward revision of the number of Iraqi refugees in Syria.

In comparison, according to UNHCR, the UK hosts about 149,000 refugees and asylum seekers. UNHCR has revised this figure downwards by a considerable amount since 2011 when they quoted a 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 126,055.

More than half of all refugees worldwide came from just three countries; Afghanistan, Syria, and Somalia. For these countries the numbers of refugees at the end of 2013 were: Afghanistan (about 2.6 million), Syria (about 2.5 million), and Somalia (about 1.1 million). Sudan (about 0.65 million), and Democratic Republic of the Congo (about 0.5 million) were the next highest numbers. UNHCR suggest that if the current pace of displacement continues Syria could replace Afghanistan as the main country of origin, having been 36th in the list just two years earlier. Afghanistan has been the main country of origin for over three decades.

Women and girls accounted for 49% of the world's refugee population in 2013, a proportion that has remained fairly constant over the past decade. 50% of the refugee population in 2013 were children under the age of 18, the highest figure in a decade. Over 25,000 asylum applications were made in 2013 by unaccompanied or separated children, mainly from Afghanistan, South Sudan, and Somalia. This is the highest number since UNHCR started collecting this data in 2006.

Globally about 1.17 million individual asylum claims were pending determination at the end of 2013, according to UNHCR. Across the EU there has been a gradual rise in the number of asylum applications since 2007, with 2010 being an exception to the trend. Total applications, including dependants, to the EU27 countries have risen from 228,200 in 2007 to 408,900 in 2013. Some Western European countries, such as France and Germany, have seen a steady increase in asylum applications over the period. In Germany, for example, numbers have risen from 19,200 in 2007, which was a record 30-year low, to 109,600 in 2013.

In the UK the number of asylum applications has remained relatively stable since 2005, compared with the very large changes in some countries, ranging from a low of 22,600 in 2010 to a high of 30,800 in 2005. In 2013 there were 29,400 applications (including dependants) in the UK. There were significant increases in the number of applications from Syria (1669 main applicants in 2012 compared with 988 in 2011 and 355 in 2010). Other countries from which there were significant increases in the number of applications in the UK in 2013 included Albania and Eritrea.

In relation to population the UK figure for 2013 at an estimated 0.46 asylum seekers per 1000 population, is below the EU27 average (0.82), and significantly lower than some other countries. The corresponding figure for Belgium is 1.61, for France 1.03, for Germany 1.36, for Norway 2.35, and for Sweden 5.65. Eastern European countries, with the exception of Bulgaria (0.96), have low figures, while in Western Europe the figures for Spain and Portugal are particularly low.

UNHCR data also examines the number of refugees per 1000 population. The effect of the Syrian crisis can again be seen. Lebanon has 178 refugees per 1000 population and Jordan 88 per 1000. These figures do not include Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA. When the 447,000 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 3 per 1000.

In 2013 the EU28 (EU member states) granted protection to 135,700 asylum seekers, an increase from 116,200 in 2012. The largest national groups were from Syria (26%), Afghanistan (12%), and Somalia (7%). In the UK the three largest national groups granted protection were from Iran (14%), Pakistan (9%), and Sri Lanka (8%). Recognition rates vary considerably, reflecting divergences between the different asylum systems across Europe. In Greece the initial recognition rate saw only 4% of applicants granted protection, as opposed to 87% in Bulgaria and 84% in Malta. In 2013 the UK, Germany, France,

Italy, the Netherlands, and Sweden accounted between them for nearly 80% of those granted protection in the EU. The UK, with 13,400 people granted protection in 2013, had the fifth highest number of positive decisions in the EU.

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, benefits, and access to health and education services. In 2013 there were 935 refugees, including dependants, resettled via the Gateway programme in the UK, the second largest number since the programme began in 2004. The European share of resettlement places is modest, the United States, Australia, and Canada together accounted for almost 90% of those resettled in 2013. Globally only 98,400 were resettled in 2013.

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 2013 the UK accepted 32 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. There is no quota for this scheme although the Home Office anticipates that several hundred people will be relocated and supported in the period 2014-16.

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 2013 Frontex detected about 107,000 illegal border crossings. This was an increase of 48% from 2012. According to Frontex this was related to a large increase in illegal border crossings by Syrians who subsequently applied for asylum, a steady flow of migrants from North Africa risking the

crossing of the Mediterranean, and a sharp increase in the first half of 2013 reported by Hungary at the border with Serbia.

Frontex does not provide a breakdown of whether those intercepted wished to seek protection, although their Annual Risk Analysis 2014 specifically says that the tripling of detections of illegal border crossings by Syrians reflects the dire situation in Syria and the desperate plight of Syrian refugees.

Sources of Statistics

UNHCR Global Trends 2013:

<http://www.unhcr.org/53a155bc6.html>

Eurostat

<http://epp.eurostat.ec.europa.eu/portal/page/portal/eurostat/home>

Home Office Statistics:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tables-for-immigration-statistics-january-to-march-2014>

Frontex:

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

About the Refugee Council

The Refugee Council is the largest organisation 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.