

### A protection-based response to the crisis in the Mediterranean

**The Refugee Council urges MPs to write to the Prime Minister and ask him to commit to creating alternative legal routes for refugees to reach safety in the UK by:**

- voluntarily pledging thousands of additional resettlement places in the UK to refugees around the world, bringing them directly and safely from the region to our shores.
- making it easier for refugees to reunite with their relatives in the UK.
- exploring other legal avenues for refugees to reach the UK, such as humanitarian or asylum visas.

**We also ask that you use any opportunity to raise these issues in Parliament.**

The humanitarian crisis unfolding in the Mediterranean is a symptom of the worst refugee crisis in recent memory. In their effort to tackle irregular migration, the UK and other states have placed a plethora of border controls overseas that effectively prevent refugees from reaching our shores. With almost no legal avenues open to them, refugees are forced to take ever greater risks in their efforts to find a safe haven. Some are trying to cross the Mediterranean.

Refugee women who are on the move in search of safety are particularly vulnerable to rape and sexual violence.

#### **Refugees or economic migrants?**

On 13 May the Home Secretary said: “Actually if you look at the people coming across central Mediterranean the large number of people are coming from countries like Nigeria, Eritrea and Somalia. They are economic migrants who’ve paid criminal gangs to take them across the Mediterranean.”

No-one can pre-judge whether or not the people risking their lives to cross the Mediterranean are refugees, not even the Home Secretary. However, her assertion that people arriving on Europe’s shores are economic migrants is particularly surprising given that they are from some of the world’s biggest refugee producing countries. She also failed to mention that 34% of those crossing are Syrians. According to the latest Home Office statistics, 85% of Eritreans and Syrians claiming asylum in the UK were recognised as refugees.

#### **Refugee Council recommendations**

The border to the EU has become the most dangerous border in the world. The need to tackle the root causes of refugee flight has never been more apparent. However, in the meantime only the creation of alternative, legal routes for refugees to find safety in the UK and other EU states will begin to address the crisis. This can be done by:

**Resettling significantly more refugees from around the world in response to the current crisis.** The UN Refugee Agency UNHCR has identified around 960,000 refugees in need of resettlement worldwide, yet the UK resettles only 750 refugees a year through the Gateway Protection Programme and has only resettled 187 refugees from Syria since the start of the conflict. The UK’s resettlement programmes should be **offering thousands of additional places** to refugees around the world at this time.

**Making it easier for refugees to reunite with their relatives in the UK.** Very few refugees with relatives in the UK would qualify for family reunion under existing regulations. Currently, only those with relatives who have been recognised as refugees are entitled to bring their families to the UK. Except in exceptional circumstances, this would only apply to spouses and dependent children under the age of 18. In practice, this is interpreted very rigidly and it is extremely difficult to join family if you are not a spouse or a dependant child.

For example, a Syrian father who has been granted asylum in the UK would be allowed to bring his wife and his younger children to join him. However his eldest child, an 18 year old daughter, would not ordinarily be allowed to travel with the family and they would be forced to leave her behind or pay smugglers to bring her to the UK.

Similarly, a Nigerian woman who has witnessed the death of her husband and children by Boko Haram and is desperate to find safety with her sister living in the UK would find it almost impossible to reach her, except by travelling illegally with the help of smugglers.

## REFUGEE COUNCIL BRIEFING, July 2015

British citizens, or others who are legally resident, with family in danger in other countries, are not eligible to bring them to safety in the UK without a fee and strict conditions which in practice are prohibitive. The rules should be more flexible for those whose family members are obviously in danger.

Additionally, other safe and legal routes should be explored such as **humanitarian or asylum visas**.

### Europe's response

Last month, the European Commission published proposals that acknowledged the role that all countries have to play in helping people fleeing for their lives find refuge, recognising the need for European countries, including the UK, to provide refugees with alternative routes to safety. However, European leaders made little progress on this aspect. They agreed:

- The relocation over two years from Italy and Greece to other member states of 40,000 persons in clear need of temporary protection.

The Prime Minister made clear that the UK would not take part in this process. The UK is home to less than 1% of the world's refugees, significantly less than many of our EU neighbours. We should show active solidarity with those receiving most new arrivals by assisting with reception and ensuring a more equitable distribution across the EU.

- The principle that all members states will participate in resettling 20,000 in clear need of international protection from outside of the EU.

This commitment is welcome but the lack of detail is disappointing and it is unclear whether or not these places will be on top of European countries' existing refugee resettlement programmes. The Prime Minister recently announced a 'modest' expansion of Britain's special resettlement programme for Syrian refugees following a campaign spearheaded by the Refugee Council. This is welcome. However, according to media reports, the increased commitment will translate to **only around an additional 100 resettlement places a year** here in the UK. Given the scale of the global refugee crisis this is **clearly inadequate**.

Far more agreement was found for measures that seek to 'contain' the problem, with a focus on strengthening borders and tackling smugglers. The Refugee Council is concerned that **without the provision of alternative legal routes to safety for the world's refugees, such measures will put people's lives still further at risk**, with the potential to trap refugees in dangerous situations in transit countries and prevent them from accessing safety in Europe. Closing our borders to refugees also sends a dangerous message to countries like Turkey, Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia and Jordan, hosting greatest proportion of the world's refugees.

### Some facts and stats

- According to UNHCR, during the first six months of 2015 there were 137,000 arrivals in Europe by sea.<sup>1</sup>
- The top 5 nationalities arriving by sea during the first six months of 2015 were Syria (34%), Afghanistan (12%), Eritrean (12%), Somalia (5%) and Nigeria (5%).<sup>2</sup>
- According to UNHCR the majority are refugees. In 2014 the 28 Member States of the EU gave 95% of Syrian asylum seekers, 89% of Eritrean asylum seekers and 63% of Afghan asylum seekers, protection in the first instance.<sup>3</sup>
- The numbers may seem high but 86% of the world's refugees live in the developing world.
- In 2014 Germany and Sweden received 43% of all EU asylum applications.<sup>4</sup> Germany received six times the number of asylum applications than the UK, Sweden received three times, Italy and France received double.<sup>5</sup>
- Since 2011, the UK has received just 6,000 asylum applications from Syrians, and has resettled only 187 Syrian refugees, according to latest public statistics. In 2014 *alone*, Germany committed to resettling 20,000 Syrian refugees and received 40,000 asylum applications from Syrians.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR, The UN Refugee Agency, *The sea route to Europe: The Mediterranean passage in the age of refugees*, published 1 July 2015, available at: <http://tracks.unhcr.org/2015/07/the-sea-route-to-europe/>

<sup>2</sup> As above, page 12

<sup>3</sup> As above, page 6

<sup>4</sup> As above, page 18

<sup>5</sup> UK received 31,000, Italy received 56,000, France received 63,000, Sweden received 81,000 and Germany received 166,000  
<http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/4168041/6742650/KS-QA-15-003-EN-N.pdf/b7786ec9-1ad6-4720-8a1d-430fcd55018>

<sup>6</sup> As above