

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

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At the end of 2020 the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide had risen to 82.4 million, 2.9 million more than at the end of 2019. This is the highest figure ever recorded, 2015 was the first year the figure had topped 60 million. During 2020 an estimated 11.2 million people were newly displaced, of which 9.8 million were within their own country. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) mention Afghanistan, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia, the Sahel region of Africa, Syria, Venezuela and Yemen as some of the hotspots for displacement in 2020. Syrians remained the largest displaced population, with a total of 13.5 million at the end of 2020, including 6.7 million refugees and a similar number internally displaced. Colombians were the second largest group with well over 8 million forcibly displaced, mostly within Colombia. Other countries with over 2 million people displaced either internally or internationally as refugees or asylum seekers include Afghanistan (5.7 million), Democratic Republic of the Congo (6.2 million), Ethiopia (2.7 million), Nigeria (2.6 million), Somalia (3.8 million), South Sudan (3.8 million), Sudan (3.4 million), Venezuela (4.9 million) and Yemen (4 million).

UNHCR comment at some length in several sections of their Global Trends Report for 2020 on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. They suggest that while the full impact on cross-border migration and displacement is not yet clear their data shows that arrivals of new refugees and asylum seekers were sharply down in most regions. They suggest that about 1.5 million people fewer arrived than would have been expected in non-Covid-19 circumstances with restrictions on travel having a major impact.

Within the overall total 20.7 million were refugees under the mandate of UNHCR, in addition to 4.1 million asylum seekers worldwide. The above figure for refugees does not include Palestinian refugees, of whom 5.7 million are registered with UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency). The total global refugee population is now the highest ever recorded. 48 million people were recorded as internally displaced.

Most refugees flee to neighbouring countries and remain in their region of origin. Nearly three quarters of people displaced across borders are located in a neighbouring country to the one from which they fled. At the end of 2020 Africa and the Middle East hosted about 37% of all people in refugee-like situations (approximately 9.1 million) while Europe hosted about 27% (approximately 6.8 million). The number in Europe increased by 3% during 2020. More than half of the refugees in Europe are in Turkey (3.65 million). About 465,000 new asylum applications were received in Europe during 2020. The main countries of origin were Syria, Afghanistan, Venezuela and Colombia.

During the second half of 2015 there was a dramatic increase in the number of refugees and migrants arriving in Europe by sea. The rise was mostly increased movement across the Mediterranean to Greece. In 2016 there was a marked increase in crossings from Libya to Italy with a significant increase in the number of people migrating from West Africa. During 2017 there was a drop in the numbers crossing the Mediterranean, but numbers remained significant with 126,550 new asylum applications in Italy in that year. Numbers fell in recent years with just over 53,000 new applications in Italy in 2018, just over 35,000 in 2019 and just over 21,000 in 2020.

Turkey has remained 1<sup>st</sup> in the rankings of refugee hosting countries for the 7<sup>th</sup> consecutive year, having been 59<sup>th</sup> just nine years ago, mainly because of the number of Syrian refugees in the country. There are now 3.65 million refugees in Turkey. Colombia is the country hosting the second largest number of refugees (1.7 million), most being Venezuelans displaced abroad. Pakistan is third at 1.4 million. There was a large increase during 2017 in the number of refugees in Uganda, from 0.94 million to 1.4 million mainly due to arrivals from South Sudan and DRC and Uganda remains fourth in the list at 1.4 million, followed by Germany (1.2 million). Lebanon remains high in the rankings, again because of the impact of the conflict in Syria. Bangladesh remains in the top ten host countries resulting from the arrival of refugees from Myanmar, whose numbers more than trebled during 2017 from 0.27 million to 0.93 million. The figure now stands at 0.88 million.

Nearly 70% of all people displaced across borders worldwide came from just five countries. The top three in the list at the end of 2020 were Syria (6.7 million), Venezuela (4.0 million), and Afghanistan (2.6 million). South Sudan (2.2 million) and Myanmar (1.1 million) were the next highest numbers. The number of refugees from Myanmar more than doubled in 2017. 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. UNHCR also drew particular attention to Venezuela in 2019.

UNHCR estimate that women and girls accounted for 47% of those displaced across borders at the end of 2020, a proportion that has remained fairly constant over the past decade and 41% were children under the age of 18. Only 4% were over 60 years old. UNHCR also estimate that between 2018 and 2020 about 1 million children were born as refugees. About 21,000 asylum applications were made in 2020 by unaccompanied or separated children, mainly from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Guinea, Syria, Iraq and Somalia. A total of over 150,000 unaccompanied children were reported as refugees, and this figure is believed to be an underestimate as it does not include data from every country.

Across Europe over recent years there was a steady rise in the number of asylum applications from 2007 to 2013. There were larger increases in 2014, and particularly in 2015. Total new applications in Europe rose from 152,890 in 2008 to 1,325,475 in 2015 and 1,236,385 in 2016. Some Western European countries, such as Sweden and Germany, saw large increases in asylum applications over the period. In Germany, for example, numbers of new applications rose from 21,325 in 2008 to 441,805 in 2015 and 722,270 in 2016. However in 2017 the total number of new applications in Europe fell to 675,795. The number fell again in 2018 to 619,390 but then rose in 2019 to 691,090 before falling to 464,690 in 2020.

In the UK the number of asylum applications has remained relatively stable in recent years, compared with the very large changes in some other countries, ranging from a low of 17,916 in 2010 to a high of 35,737 in 2019. (All these UK figures exclude dependants). In 2020 there were 29,456 new applications. In 2020 there were significant increases in the number of applications from Eritrea (2,496 main applicants in 2020 compared with 1,876 in 2019), Sudan (2,040 main applicants in 2020 compared with

1,524 in 2019) and Syria (1,478 main applicants in 2020 compared with 1,031 in 2019). The number of applicants from the other main countries of origin fell significantly in 2020, probably showing the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

UNHCR data also examines the number of refugees per 1000 population. The effect of the Syrian and Venezuelan crises can be seen. Lebanon has about 128 refugees per 1000 population, Jordan about 69 per 1000 and Turkey about 43 per 1000. These figures do not include Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA. When the refugees registered with UNRWA are included the figure for Lebanon rises to about 1 in 4 of the population and for Jordan to almost 1 in 3. 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. Some Caribbean islands have been affected by the situation in Venezuela so in 2020 Aruba had 159 refugees per 1000 population and Curacao had 102. The comparable figure for the UK is less than 2 per 1000.

In 2020 Europe granted protection to 230,506 asylum seekers, roughly 42% of the decisions made were either a grant of refugee status or some other form of protection. The largest national group was from Syria. In the UK the largest national groups granted protection were from Iran, Eritrea and Sudan.

## **Resettlement**

Resettlement 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 a number of local authorities are participating in the Gateway Protection Programme, under which the UK set a quota of up to 750 refugees to settle in the UK each year. 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 2020 there were 77 refugees, including dependants, resettled via the Gateway programme in the UK. This was a large decrease compared with earlier years, again probably reflecting the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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 2020 the UK accepted 5 people through the Mandate scheme.

The Vulnerable Person Relocation Scheme first established in January 2014 and later known as the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement 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 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. The actual number in 2016 was 4,369, compared with 143 in 2014 and 1,194 in 2015. The previous government committed in 2015 to resettle 20,000 Syrians before 2020. This programme was revised to include other nationalities fleeing from Syria.

Now that the 20,000 target has been reached the schemes have been consolidated and will now be known as the UK Resettlement Scheme

Internationally resettlement plummeted to its lowest level for two decades according to UNHCR with only 34,400 people resettled across 21 countries. This is one third of the number resettled in 2019. The European share of resettlement places decreased to 11,600 in 2020 compared with over 30,000 in 2019.

The United States accepted the largest numbers for resettlement in 2020 (9,600). Canada was second highest and accepted 9,200. Both of these figures a large decrease from 2019 when 27,500 people were accepted in the USA and 30,100 in Canada. The UK has been among the countries contributing most to resettlement in recent years but the numbers fell sharply in 2020 to just 823 from over 5,600 in 2019. The country of origin with the largest numbers accepted for resettlement was Syria.

### **Interception measures**

The UK has a network of Immigration Liaison Managers overseas. They focus on locations that 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 (Calais and Dunkirk) and to Eurostar terminals in Belgium, France and the Netherlands 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. In 2020 Frontex reported the detection of 124,000 illegal border crossings at the EU external borders, a significant reduction from 2016 when the figure was over 500,000 and a large reduction compared with 2015 when 1.8 million illegal crossings were reported, the highest figure ever. There were large increases in 2020 on the Central Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes but decreases on the Western and Eastern Mediterranean routes.

Frontex has also been gradually increasing the number of non-EU nationals returned on its own charter flights.

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 2020:

<https://www.unhcr.org/uk/statistics/unhcrstats/60b638e37/global-trends-forced-displacement-2020.html>

Eurostat:

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/asylum-and-managed-migration/data/database>

Home Office Statistics:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-march-2021/list-of-tables>

Frontex:

<https://frontex.europa.eu/we-know/migratory-map/>

## 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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