

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

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At the end of 2021 the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide had risen to 89.3 million, 6.9 million more than at the end of 2020. This is the highest figure ever recorded, 2015 was the first year the figure had topped 60 million. During 2021 an estimated 16.1 million people were newly displaced, of which 14.4 million were within their own country. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) in their Global Trends Report for 2021 mention Afghanistan, Ethiopia, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Syria, Venezuela and Yemen as some of the hotspots for displacement in 2021. Syrians remained the largest population of concern to UNHCR, with a total of just under 14 million at the end of 2021, including 6.9 million refugees and a similar number internally displaced. Democratic Republic of Congo had 7.5 million of concern to UNHCR of whom 5.4 million were internally displaced. Other countries with over 3 million people of concern, displaced either internally or internationally as refugees or asylum seekers include Colombia (7.5 million), Afghanistan (7.3 million), Venezuela (7.0 million), Ethiopia (5.5 million), South Sudan (4.7 million), Somalia (4.4 million), Yemen (4.4 million), Sudan (3.9 million) and Nigeria (3.8 million).

The UNHCR report deals mainly with the situation at the end of 2021. However they do comment on Ukraine saying that at the time of writing the report more than 7 million had been internally displaced in Ukraine and more than 6 million refugee movements from Ukraine had been recorded. This is one of the largest forced displacement movements since the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War and certainly one of the fastest.

UNHCR commented at some length in several sections of their Global Trends Report for 2020 on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. They suggested that in 2020 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. Numbers have clearly risen in 2021 but Covid-19 is still having an impact. Also in 2021 they comment on the prevalence of food crises with 82% of internally displaced people and 67% of refugees and asylum seekers originating from countries with food crises in 2021. Their estimate for Afghanistan is that 55% of the population do not have enough to eat each day.

Within the overall total 21.3 million were refugees under the mandate of UNHCR, in addition to 4.6 million asylum seekers worldwide. The above figure for refugees does not include Palestinian refugees, of whom 5.8 million are registered with UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency). The total global refugee population is now the highest ever recorded. Over 53 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 2021 Africa and the Middle East hosted about 45% of all people in refugee-like situations (approximately 9.4 million) while Europe hosted about 33% (approximately 7 million). The number in Europe increased by 3% during 2021. More than half of the refugees in Europe are in Türkiye (3.8 million). About 599,000 new asylum applications were received in Europe during 2021. The main countries of origin were Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq.

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 but rose again to over 53,000 in 2021.

Türkiye has remained 1<sup>st</sup> in the rankings of refugee hosting countries for the 8<sup>th</sup> consecutive year, having been 59<sup>th</sup> just ten years ago, mainly because of the number of Syrian refugees in the country. There are now 3.8 million refugees in Türkiye. Colombia is the country hosting the second largest number of refugees (1.8 million), most being Venezuelans displaced abroad. Uganda is third at over 1.5 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. Pakistan is fourth in the list at 1.5 million, followed by Germany (1.25 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 0.92 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 2021 were Syria (6.8 million), Venezuela (4.6 million), and Afghanistan (2.7 million). South Sudan (2.4 million) and Myanmar (1.2 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 estimates that women and girls accounted for 49% of those displaced across borders at the end of 2021, a proportion that has remained fairly constant over the past decade and 41% were children under the age of 18. Only 6% were over 60 years old. UNHCR also estimate that between 2018 and 2021 about 1.5 million children were born as refugees. About 27,000 asylum applications were made in 2021 by unaccompanied or separated children, mainly from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Guinea, Syria, Iraq and Somalia. 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 and 2016. 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 745,160 in 2016. Numbers are generally lower since 2016 but still higher than 10 years ago.

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 125 refugees per 1000 population, Jordan about 70

per 1000 and Türkiye 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 2021 Aruba had about 166 refugees per 1000 population. The comparable figure for the UK is less than 2 per 1000.

In 2021 Europe made decisions on about 548,000 asylum claims and granted protection in roughly 41% of these cases. 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, Syria 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. No refugees were resettled under this scheme in 2021.

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 2021 the UK accepted 2 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. 1,125 people were resettled under this scheme in 2021.

In 2020 resettlement plummeted to its lowest level for two decades internationally with only 34,400 people resettled across 21 countries. This was related to the Covid pandemic. The figure rose to 57,500 in 2021 but remained significantly below pre-pandemic levels. Canada accepted the largest numbers (20,400) with United States second highest at 13,700. In Europe the country accepting the largest number was Sweden at 6,700. These 3 countries between them were responsible for over 70% of resettlements. Afghanistan and Syria were the countries of origin from which the largest numbers of people were resettled.

## **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.

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. Frontex has also been gradually increasing the number of non-EU nationals returned on its own charter flights and in 2021 reported returning 18,300 people and the detection of 1,050 people smugglers.

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**

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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UNHCR Global Trends 2021:

<https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends>

Eurostat:

<https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database>

Home Office Statistics:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-march-2022/list-of-tables>

Frontex:

<https://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.