

The UK's role in the international refugee protection system

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At the end of 2016 the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide had risen to 65.6 million, 300,000 more than at the end of 2015. This is the highest figure ever recorded, 2015 was the first year the figure had topped 60 million. The increased numbers reflect the on going crisis in Syria. Syrians remained the largest displaced population, with a total of 12 million people at the end of 2016, including 5.5 million refugees and 6.3 million internally displaced. Colombians were the second largest group with 7.7 million forcibly displaced, mostly within Colombia. Other countries with over 2 million people displaced either internally or as refugees or asylum seekers were Afghanistan (4.7 million), Democratic Republic of the Congo (2.9 million), Iraq (4.2 million), South Sudan (3.3 million), Sudan (2.9 million), Somalia (2.6 million), Nigeria (2.5 million), Ukraine (2.1 million) and Yemen (2.1 million).

Within the overall total 17.2 million were refugees under the mandate of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), in addition to 2.8 million asylum seekers worldwide. The above figure for refugees does not include Palestinian refugees, of whom 5.3 million are registered with UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency). The total global refugee population is now the highest ever recorded.

Most refugees flee to neighbouring countries and remain in their region of origin. At the end of 2016 Africa and the Middle East hosted about 47% of all refugees (7.73 million refugees) while Europe hosted about 31% (approximately 5.15 million refugees). The number of refugees in Europe increased by 18% from 2015-16. More than 1.2 million asylum applications were received in the EU during 2016. The main countries of origin were Syria (334,820), Afghanistan (182,982), and Iraq (126,955).

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 2016 the European Border and Coastguard Agency rescued 90,000 migrants in operations in the Central Mediterranean and the Aegean Sea. There were also several thousand people who died or were reported missing during these crossings.

Turkey has remained 1st in the rankings of refugee hosting countries, having been 59th just five years ago, because of the number of Syrian refugees entering the country. There are now 2.9 million refugees in Turkey. During 2016 there were 330,000 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 (1.4 million) followed by Lebanon (1.0 million), Iran (979,400), Uganda (940,800) and Ethiopia (791,600).

In comparison, according to UNHCR, the UK hosts about 166,843 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 118,995.

More than three quarters of all refugees worldwide came from just ten countries. The top three in the list at the end of 2016 were: Syria (5.5 million), Afghanistan (2.5 million), and Somalia (1.1 million). South Sudan (1.44 million), Sudan (0.65 million), and Democratic Republic of the Congo (0.54 million) were the next highest numbers. Syria replaced Afghanistan as the main country of origin in 2014, having been 36th in the list just four years earlier. Previously Afghanistan was the main country of origin for over three decades.

Women and girls accounted for 49% of the world's refugee population in 2016, a proportion that has remained fairly constant over the past decade. 51% of the refugee population in 2016 were children under the age of 18. Only 4% were over 60 years old. About 75,000 asylum applications were made in 2016 by unaccompanied or separated children, mainly from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Syria, Iraq and Somalia.

Globally about 2.83 million individual asylum claims were pending determination at the end of 2016, according to UNHCR. Across the EU 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 to the EU28 countries have risen from 152,890 in 2008 to 1,257,030 in 2015 and 1,205,095 in 2016. Some Western European countries, such as Sweden and Germany, have seen large increases in asylum applications over the period. In Germany, for example, numbers of new applications have risen from 21,325 in 2008 to 441,800 in 2015 and 722,265 in 2016.

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 2016 there were 30,603 applications. In 2016 there were significant increases in the number of applications from Iran (4,192 main applicants in 2016 compared with 3,242 in 2015), Bangladesh (1,939 main applicants in 2016 compared with 1,110 in 2015), India (1,488 main applicants in 2016 compared with 1,014 in 2015), and Iraq (2,666 main applicants in 2016 compared with 2,216 in 2015). The number of applicants from Syria fell in 2016 by 45% compared with 2015.

UNHCR data also examines the number of refugees per 1000 population. The effect of the Syrian crisis can again be seen. Lebanon has 169 refugees per 1000 population and Jordan about 90 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 2016 the EU28 (EU member states) granted protection to 672,900 asylum seekers, an increase from 307,510 in 2015. The largest national group was from Syria (398,100). In the UK the largest national groups granted protection were from Syria, Iran, Sudan, and Eritrea.

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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 2016 there were 804 refugees, including dependants, resettled via the Gateway programme in the UK.

The European share of resettlement places is modest. The United States was responsible for 51% of all resettlement in 2016, accepting 96,900 people. The United States, Australia, and Canada together accounted for 90% of those resettled in 2016. Globally 189,300 were resettled in 2016, which represents a 77% increase on 2015. The country of origin with the largest numbers accepted for resettlement was Syria (63,000 people).

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 2016 the UK accepted 8 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 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.

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 2016 Frontex reported the detection of about 511,000 illegal border crossings at the EU external borders, a significant reduction from 2015 when the figure was over 1 million, but still considerably higher than earlier years. In 2014 the reported figure was 282,933 and in 2013 it was 104,060. The decrease was mainly due to fewer people arriving in Greece from Turkey following the implementation of strict border controls in Western Balkan countries, effectively closing the Balkan route.

According to Frontex most detections occurred in the Mediterranean after the controls were introduced on the Balkan routes.

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 2016:

<http://www.unhcr.org/5943e8a34>

Eurostat:

http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/data/database?node_code=tps00191

Home Office Statistics:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-january-to-march-2017/list-of-tables>

Frontex:

http://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/Risk_Analysis/Annual_Risk_Analysis_2017.pdf

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.