

The UK's role in the international refugee protection system

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At the end of 2018 the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide had risen to 70.8 million, 2.3 million more than at the end of 2017. This is the highest figure ever recorded, 2015 was the first year the figure had topped 60 million. At over 1.5 million Ethiopians were the largest newly displaced population during 2018, the vast majority within their own country. The ongoing crisis in Syria meant that over 889,000 Syrians were newly displaced in 2018, most of whom left the country. Nigeria also had a large number of newly displaced people, over 661,000, the majority within the country. Syrians remained the largest displaced population, with a total of almost 13 million at the end of 2018, including 6.6 million refugees and almost 6.2 million internally displaced. Colombians were the second largest group with 8.0 million forcibly displaced, mostly within Colombia. Other countries with over 2 million people displaced either internally or as refugees or asylum seekers were Afghanistan (5.1 million), Democratic Republic of the Congo (5.4 million), Iraq (2.4 million), South Sudan (4.2 million), Sudan (2.7 million), Somalia (3.7 million), Nigeria (2.5 million), and Yemen (2.2 million).

Within the overall total 20.4 million were refugees under the mandate of the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), in addition to 3.5 million asylum seekers worldwide. The above figure for refugees does not include Palestinian refugees, of whom 5.5 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. Almost 80% of refugees are located in a neighbouring country to the one from which they fled. At the end of 2018 Africa and the Middle East hosted about 44% of all refugees (approximately 9.0 million refugees) while Europe hosted about 32% (approximately 6.5 million refugees). The number of refugees in Europe increased by 6% during 2018. More than half of the refugees in Europe are in Turkey (3.7 million). 586,235 new asylum applications were received in the EU during 2018. 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 126,500 new asylum applications in Italy during 2017. Numbers fell again in 2018, with just over 53,000 new applications in Italy.

Turkey has remained 1st in the rankings of refugee hosting countries for the 5th consecutive year, having been 59th just seven years ago, mainly because of the number of Syrian refugees in the country. There are now 3.7 million refugees in Turkey. Pakistan is the country hosting the second largest number of refugees (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 third in the list. Sudan is fourth in the list at 1.1 million, followed by Germany (1.1 million). Lebanon and Jordan remain 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.

In comparison, according to UNHCR, the UK hosts 172,089 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 126,720.

Over 80% of all refugees worldwide came from just ten countries. The top three in the list at the end of 2018 were Syria (6.7 million), Afghanistan (2.7 million) and South Sudan (2.3 million). Myanmar (1.1 million), Somalia (0.95 million), Sudan (0.73 million) and Democratic Republic of the Congo (0.72 million) were the next highest numbers. The other three countries making up the top ten in numbers were Central African Republic, Eritrea and Burundi. The number of refugees from Myanmar more than doubled in 2017. 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. UNHCR also drew particular attention to Venezuela stating that by the end of 2018 more than 3 million Venezuelans had left their homes, travelling mainly towards Latin America and the Caribbean. About 350,000 Venezuelans sought asylum in 2018.

Women and girls accounted for 48% of the world's refugee population in 2018, a proportion that has remained fairly constant over the past decade. About half of the refugee population in 2018 were children under the age of 18. Only 3% were over 60 years old. About 27,600 asylum applications were made in 2018 by unaccompanied or separated children, mainly from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Guinea, Syria, Iraq and Somalia. A total of 110,000 unaccompanied children were reported as refugees, and this figure is believed to be an underestimate as it represents data from only 53 countries.

Globally about 3.5 million individual asylum claims were pending determination at the end of 2018, 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 rose 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, saw large increases in asylum applications over the period. In Germany, for example, numbers of new applications rose from 21,325 in 2008 to 441,800 in 2015 and 722,265 in 2016. However in 2017 the total number of new applications fell to 650,000 and the number fell again in 2018 to 586,000.

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 32,733 in 2015. (All these UK figures exclude dependants). In 2018 there were 29,380 new applications. In 2018 there were significant increases in the number of applications from Eritrea (2,158 main applicants in 2018 compared with 1,085 in 2017), Albania (2,001 main applicants in 2018 compared with 1,430 in 2017) and Iran (3,317 main applicants in 2018 compared with 2,570 in 2017). The number of applicants

from some of the other main countries of origin fell in 2018, with the largest reduction being Bangladesh (24% reduction).

UNHCR data also examines the number of refugees per 1000 population. The effect of the Syrian crisis can again be seen. Lebanon has about 156 refugees per 1000 population, Jordan about 72 per 1000 and Turkey about 45 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. The comparable figure for the UK is less than 2 per 1000.

In 2018 the EU28 (EU member states) granted protection to 217,000 asylum seekers, a decrease of about 50% from 2017. The largest national group was from Syria. In the UK the largest national groups granted protection were from Iran, Eritrea and Sudan.

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 a number of 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 2018 there were 693 refugees, including dependants, resettled via the Gateway programme in the UK.

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 2018 the UK accepted 18 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. In 2017 a further 4,832 people came to the UK via this scheme and in 2018 the number was 4,407. The previous government committed in 2015 to resettle 20,000 Syrians before 2020. This has been revised to include other nationalities who are fleeing from Syria.

The European share of resettlement places is modest. Canada accepted the largest numbers for resettlement in 2018 (28,100). The United States was second highest and accepted 22,900 but this represents a large decrease from 2016 when 96,900 people were accepted. The UK was fourth highest in numbers resettled according to UNHCR. Globally 92,400 were resettled in 2018, which represents a large decrease on 2016 (189,300). The country of origin with the largest numbers accepted for resettlement was Syria (over 30% of the total).

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 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. In 2018 Frontex reported the detection of 150,100 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. In 2014 the reported figure was 282,933 and in 2013 it was 104,060. The decrease was mainly due to fewer people being detected on the Central Mediterranean, Eastern Mediterranean and Western Balkan routes following the implementation of strict border controls in Western Balkan countries, effectively closing the Balkan route.

Frontex has also been gradually increasing the number of non-EU nationals returned on its own charter flights with over 13,000 such returns in 2018.

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 2018:

<https://www.unhcr.org/global-trends-2018-media.html>

Eurostat:

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

Home Office Statistics:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-statistics-year-ending-march-2019-data-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.