

The UK's role in the international refugee protection system

June 2020

At the end of 2019 the number of forcibly displaced people worldwide had risen to 79.5 million, 8.7 million more than at the end of 2018. This is the highest figure ever recorded, 2015 was the first year the figure had topped 60 million. During 2019 an estimated 11 million people were newly displaced, of which 8.6 million were within their own country. UNHCR mention Democratic Republic of the Congo, Syria, Venezuela and Yemen as some of the hotspots for displacement in 2019. Syrians remained the largest displaced population, with a total of 13.2 million at the end of 2019, including 6.6 million refugees and more than 6 million internally displaced. Colombians were the second largest group with 8.7 million forcibly displaced, mostly within Colombia. Other countries with over 2 million people displaced either internally or as refugees or asylum seekers include Afghanistan (6 million), Democratic Republic of the Congo (8.1 million), Ethiopia (3.2 million), Iraq (2.5 million), Nigeria (2.6 million), Somalia (3.6 million), South Sudan (4.3 million), Sudan (2.7 million), Venezuela (4.9 million) and Yemen (3.8 million).

Within the overall total 20.4 million were refugees under the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), in addition to 4.2 million asylum seekers worldwide. The above figure for refugees does not include Palestinian refugees, of whom 5.6 million are registered with UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency). The total global refugee population is now the highest ever recorded. 45.7 million people were recorded as internally displaced. UNHCR also reported 3.6 million people from Venezuela displaced abroad, who had not been included in previous reports. This is in addition to Venezuelans who are asylum seekers (794,500) or refugees (93,300).

Most refugees flee to neighbouring countries and remain in their region of origin. 73% of refugees are located in a neighbouring country to the one from which they fled. At the end of 2019 Africa and the Middle East hosted about 37% of all people in refugee-like situations (approximately 9.0 million) while Europe hosted about 27% (approximately 6.6 million). The number of in Europe increased by 2.2% during 2019. More than half of the refugees in Europe are in Turkey (3.6 million). 672,475 new asylum applications were received in Europe during 2019. The main countries of origin were Syria, Afghanistan and Venezuela.

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 again in 2018 and 2019 with just over 53,000 new applications in Italy in 2018 and just over 35,000 in 2019.

Turkey has remained 1st in the rankings of refugee hosting countries for the 6th consecutive year, having been 59th just eight years ago, mainly because of the number of Syrian refugees in the country. There are now 3.6 million refugees in Turkey. Colombia is the country hosting the second largest number of refugees (1.8 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 (1.1 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 195,062 refugees and asylum seekers. UNHCR has revised this figure downwards 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 to 133,094.

Over 80% of all people displaced across borders worldwide came from just ten countries. The top three in the list at the end of 2019 were Syria (6.6 million), Venezuela (3.7 million), and Afghanistan (2.7 million). South Sudan (2.23 million), Myanmar (1.1 million), Somalia (0.9 million), Democratic Republic of the Congo (0.81 million) and Sudan (0.73 million) were the next highest numbers. The other two countries making up the top ten in numbers were Central African Republic and Eritrea. 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 in 2019.

Women and girls accounted for 48% of the world's refugee population in 2019, a proportion that has remained fairly constant over the past decade. Over half of the refugee population in 2019 were children under the age of 18. Only 4% were over 60 years old. About 25,000 asylum applications were made in 2019 by unaccompanied or separated children, mainly from Afghanistan, Eritrea, Guinea, Syria, Iraq and Somalia. A total of 153,300 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 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 1,256,580 in 2015 and 1,206,055 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 fell to 654,620 and the number fell again in 2018 to 587,355 but rose in 2019 to 656,945.

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 35,566 in 2019. (All these UK figures exclude dependants). In 2019 there were 35,566 new applications. In 2019 there were significant increases in the number of applications from Albania (3,453 main applicants in 2019 compared with 2,005 in 2018) and Iran (4,853 main applicants in 2019 compared with 3,320 in 2018). Applications from China and Vietnam also increased. The number of applicants from some of the other main countries of origin fell in 2019, with the largest reduction being Eritrea (12% reduction).

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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 156 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 2019 Aruba had 156 refugees per 1000 population and Curacao had 99. The comparable figure for the UK is less than 2 per 1000.

In 2019 Europe (the EU28) granted protection to 221,030 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

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 2019 there were 704 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 2019 the UK accepted 11 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

The European share of resettlement places increased to over 30,000 in 2019. Canada accepted the largest numbers for resettlement in 2019 (30,100). The United States was second highest and accepted 27,500 but this represents a large decrease from 2016 when 96,900 people were accepted in the USA. The UK is among the countries contributing most to resettlement. Globally 107,800 were resettled in 2019, which represents a large decrease on 2016 (189,300). 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 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 2019 Frontex reported the detection of 139,000 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. 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, closing the Balkan route.

Frontex has also been gradually increasing the number of non-EU nationals returned on its own charter flights with 15,850 such returns in 2019.

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 2019:

<https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2019/>

Eurostat:

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

Home Office Statistics:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-year-ending-march-2020/list-of-tables#asylum-and-resettlement>

Frontex:

https://frontex.europa.eu/assets/Publications/General/frontex_inbrief_website_002.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.