

The sea route to Europe: The Mediterranean passage in the age of refugees

 **UNHCR**
The UN Refugee Agency

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Afghan refugees leave their dinghy and wade ashore in Mytilini, on the Greek island of Lesbos. UNHCR/Jowan Akkash

Europe is living through a maritime refugee crisis.

Europe is living through a maritime refugee crisis of historic proportions. Its evolving response has become one of the continent's defining challenges of the early 21st century, with long-lasting implications for humanitarian practice, regional stability and international public opinion.

In the first six months of this year, 137,000 refugees and migrants crossed the Mediterranean Sea, travelling in terrible conditions upon unsafe boats and dinghies.

Many more tried, but didn't make it. In mid-April 2015, 800 people died in the largest refugee shipwreck on record, highlighting a staggering increase in refugees and migrants dying or missing at sea. This tragedy thrust the crisis into headlines around the world, and the EU launched a series of emergency meetings to establish a more effective

joint response.

These events raise profound questions. Who are the people arriving on Europe's southern shores, where are they coming from, and why? How can Europe best help them, both to alleviate the suffering that drives them further from their homes, and to address its root causes?

Six major findings of this report:

- 1.** The majority of those taking the sea route to Europe are refugees, and their numbers continue to rise rapidly. Most people arriving by sea are fleeing from war, conflict or persecution at home, as well as deteriorating conditions in many refugee-hosting countries. EU States have a clear responsibility to offer them protection, and an obligation along with others

to rescue people in danger at sea.

2. The number of deaths at sea rose to record levels in April 2015, then dropped significantly in May and June. While many factors contributed to the recent decline, improved European-led search-and-rescue operations beginning in May have had an immediate and positive impact. Yet the peak months still lie ahead.

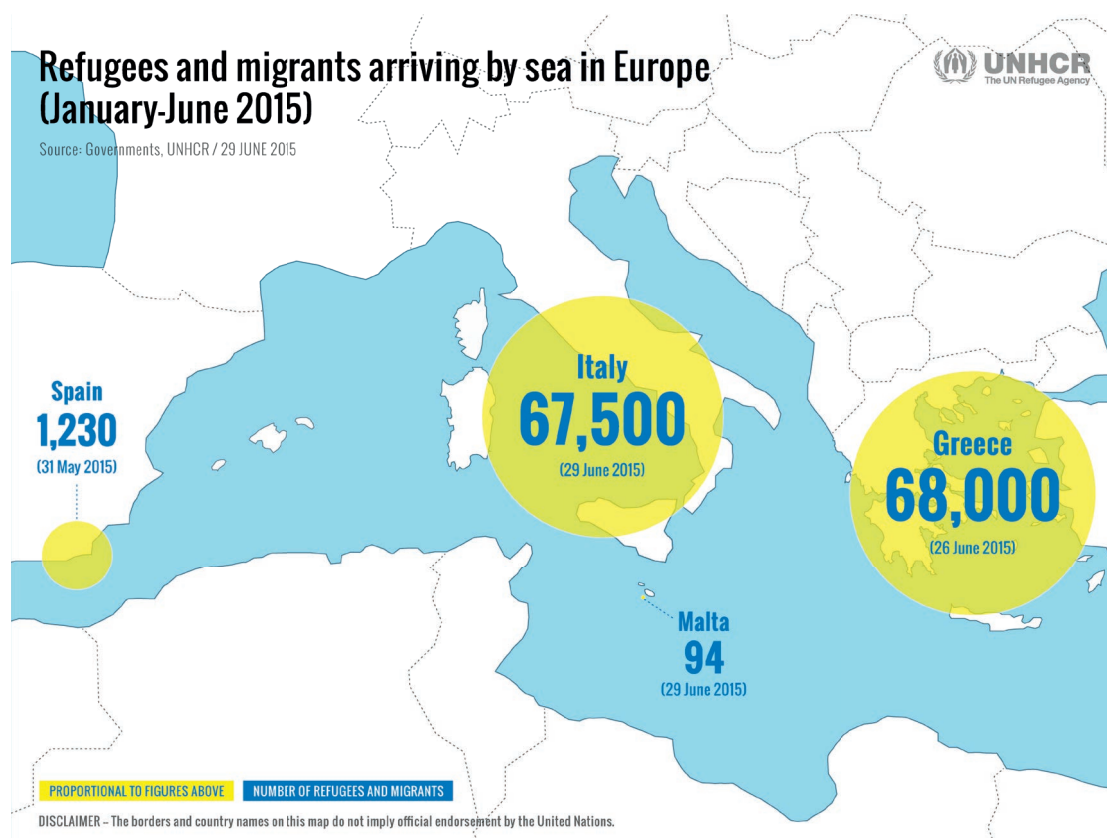
3. There has been a major increase in refugees and migrants taking the ‘eastern Mediterranean route’ from Turkey to Greece. More than 85 per cent of those arriving in Greece are from countries experiencing war and conflict, principally Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia. From Greece, most move onwards across the Balkans to western and northern Europe. Italy remains the primary destination for Eritreans, Somalis and other people from sub-Saharan Africa.

4. As arrivals increase, reception capacity and conditions remain seriously inadequate. While conditions of reception in Italy vary a great deal, serious systemic gaps remain in Greece. The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia collectively offer fewer than 3,000 places of reception, significantly

below the levels of arrivals (19,000 arrivals in the first weeks of June alone). This impacts people with special needs, including unaccompanied and separated children, increasing their vulnerability and risk of exploitation. This is an emergency situation, which requires urgent attention and far greater support for efforts to handle new arrivals. If this situation remains unaddressed, onward movement of refugees and migrants is likely to continue on a significant scale.

5. The number of refugees and migrants entering the western Balkans from Greece has already dramatically increased since the beginning of June, with over 1,000 people entering every day, as opposed to 200 just a few weeks ago. They face serious humanitarian and protection challenges linked to the hardship of the journey, the abuses of smugglers and criminal gangs, and the increasing tightening of the borders.

6. Countries of origin and the international community at large need to do better at preventing and resolving conflicts. Transit countries need to develop their asylum systems, including reception arrangements and identification processes.



As EU Member States and others debate how best to respond to these trends, it is important to place them in the context of a worldwide rise in forced displacement, including a sharp increase in those seeking safety across the sea. Despite the significant media attention it has garnered, the Mediterranean crisis constitutes a relatively small part of the global picture. When looking at the increases in the number of arrivals to Europe, it can easily be forgotten that 86 per cent of the world's refugees are hosted in developing countries.

Europe's response to the crisis on its own shores sends a particularly important message. As part of the comprehensive response needed, UNHCR is calling for a bold response in the number of places offered through resettlement, family reunification and other legal alternatives. These should be coupled with actions to increase intra-EU solidarity and to address root causes of displacement.

In this exceptional time, Europe and the international community need to deepen their solidarity with the forcibly displaced, notably by accepting larger numbers of people in need of protection.

The protection of refugees has been a core human value as long as civilization has flourished. There are references to assisting those fleeing war and persecution in texts written 3,500 years ago, during the blossoming of the great Hittite, Babylonian, Assyrian and Egyptian empires. In modern times, the 1951 Refugee Convention has set the global standard for refugee protection. At a moment of persistent and new conflicts, its principles are as important as ever. The Common European Asylum System is an advanced regional protection legal framework and must be upheld and fully implemented by all Member States.

EUROPE IN A WORLD OF DISPLACEMENT

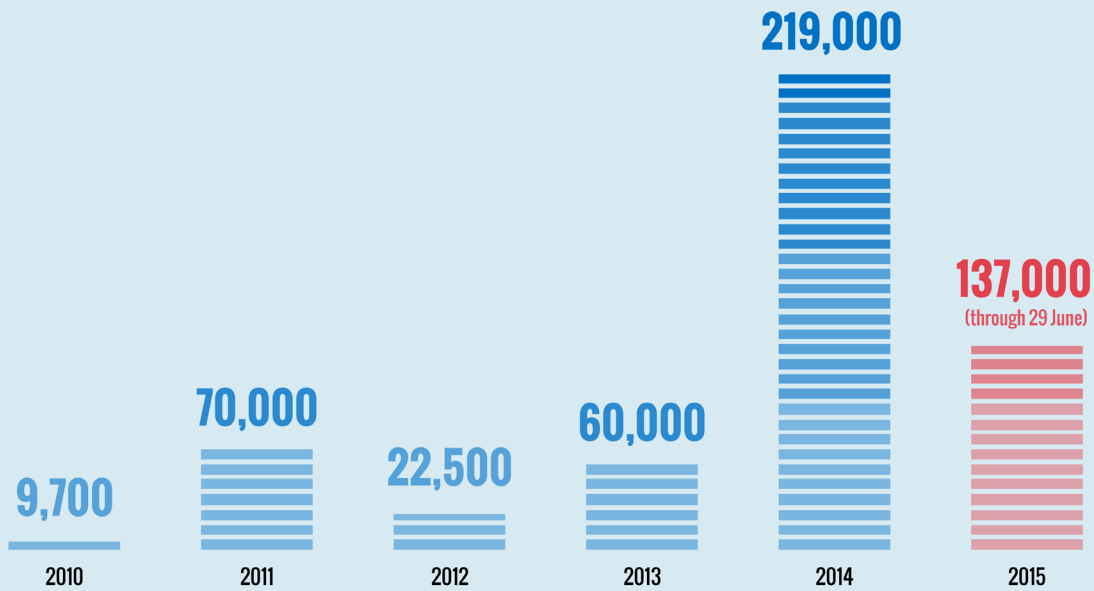
59.5 million people worldwide were forcibly displaced at the end of 2014, as a result of persecution, conflict and human rights violations, the highest level on record. That was 8.3 million people more than at the end of 2013: the biggest annual increase ever in a single year. 19.5 million of those people were refugees.

EU countries hosted a relatively small share of that number. At the end of 2014, the world's top refugee host was Turkey, followed by Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia and Jordan. Lebanon hosted by far the largest number of refugees by population, 232 per 1,000 inhabitants. Worldwide, 86 per cent of the refugees under UNHCR's mandate lived in developing countries.

Source: UNHCR Global Trends 2014, World at War

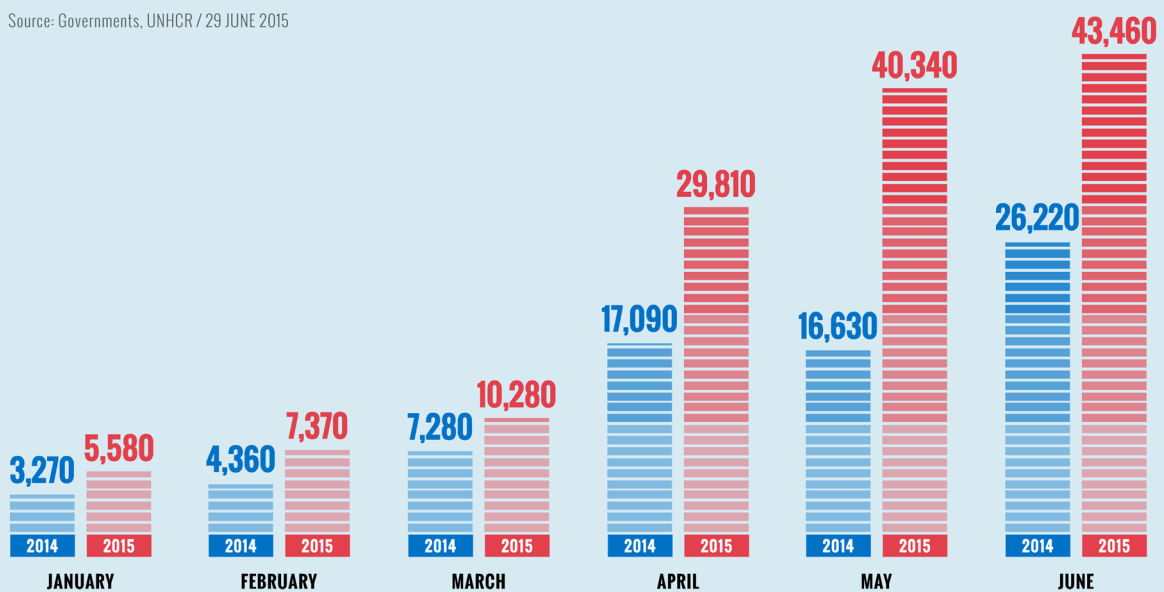
Refugees and migrants arriving by sea in Europe

Source: Governments, UNHCR / 29 JUNE 2015



Refugees and migrants arriving by sea in Europe (2014 and 2015)

Source: Governments, UNHCR / 29 JUNE 2015



1. Europe's growing maritime refugee crisis

In the first six months of 2015, 137,000 refugees and migrants arrived in Europe by sea, in profoundly difficult and unsafe conditions. That compares to 75,000 in the same period in 2014, marking an 83 per cent increase over 2014. That number can be expected to increase further in the second half of the year, especially during the summer months of July, August and September. Arrivals in the second half of 2014, for example, were almost double those of the first half.

In the first half of 2015, 43,900 Syrians came to Europe's shores – the single largest group by a considerable number, accounting for 34 per cent of all arrivals. This follows a similar trend in 2014, when 69,000 Syrians arrived by sea, 32 per cent of

all arrivals.

Most are likely to qualify as refugees, or receive some other form of international protection. In 2014, the 28 Member States of the EU gave 95 per cent of Syrians protection in the first instance, the highest percentage of any nationality, according to Eurostat.

The second and third highest countries of origin were Eritrea and Afghanistan, accounting for 12 per cent and 11 per cent of maritime arrivals respectively. In 2014, the 28 EU countries gave 89 per cent of asylum-seekers from Eritrea protection, and 63 per cent from Afghanistan. Arrivals from other top countries of origin, including Somalia, Iraq and Sudan, may also be in need of international protection.

Many have first fled for safety to neighbouring

Coffins containing the bodies of refugees and migrants who perished when their boat sank off the coast of Lampedusa. UNHCR/Francesco Maltavolta



countries, such as Turkey and Lebanon. But after years of rising pressure, the economies and infrastructure of many refugee-hosting countries are buckling, making it increasingly difficult for refugees to find work, shelter, health care, and education. As humanitarian appeals to assist them go underfunded, many simply move on.

The lack of legal routes leaves no choice for many men, women and children but to turn to smugglers, at enormous cost and danger to their lives. Before arriving in Europe, many suffer high levels of abuse, exploitation and human rights violations. Some are taken hostage at gunpoint, released only if their families pay ransoms they can ill afford to violent illegal gangs.

The majority of those arriving in Europe in the first six months of 2015 were men, searching for a safe

place to live and work before attempting to reunite later with their families. But they also included large numbers of women and children, including thousands of unaccompanied and separated children. (See sidebar on unaccompanied and separated children.)

The fundamental fact remains that most are refugees fleeing conflict and persecution, with protection guaranteed under international law. The Mediterranean boat crisis has become primarily a refugee crisis.

A UNHCR staff member helps refugees and migrants to register at a police station in Kos. UNHCR/Socrates Baltagiannis





A boat filled with refugees and migrants is rescued by the Italian Finance Police vessel Di Bartolo off the coast of Sicily. Reuters/Alessandro Bianchi

2. Rescue at sea: Tragedy and response

In October 2013, a boat carrying hundreds of refugees and migrants from Libya to Italy sank near the island of Lampedusa, killing 368 refugees. Shortly after, Italy launched a historic search and rescue at sea operation called Mare Nostrum.

This operation contributed to saving thousands of lives. However, it gradually sparked opposition as some countries saw it as a pull factor. The operation ended in December 2014. An initially smaller operation led by the EU's border agency, Frontex, was put in place, with fewer resources, a mandate focused on border control, and with a more limited scope to rescue people at sea.

This shift did not diminish the number of refugees and migrants making the crossing. At a time of

growing instability in Libya, and rising pressure in refugee-hosting countries neighbouring Syria, many refugees felt they had no other choice.

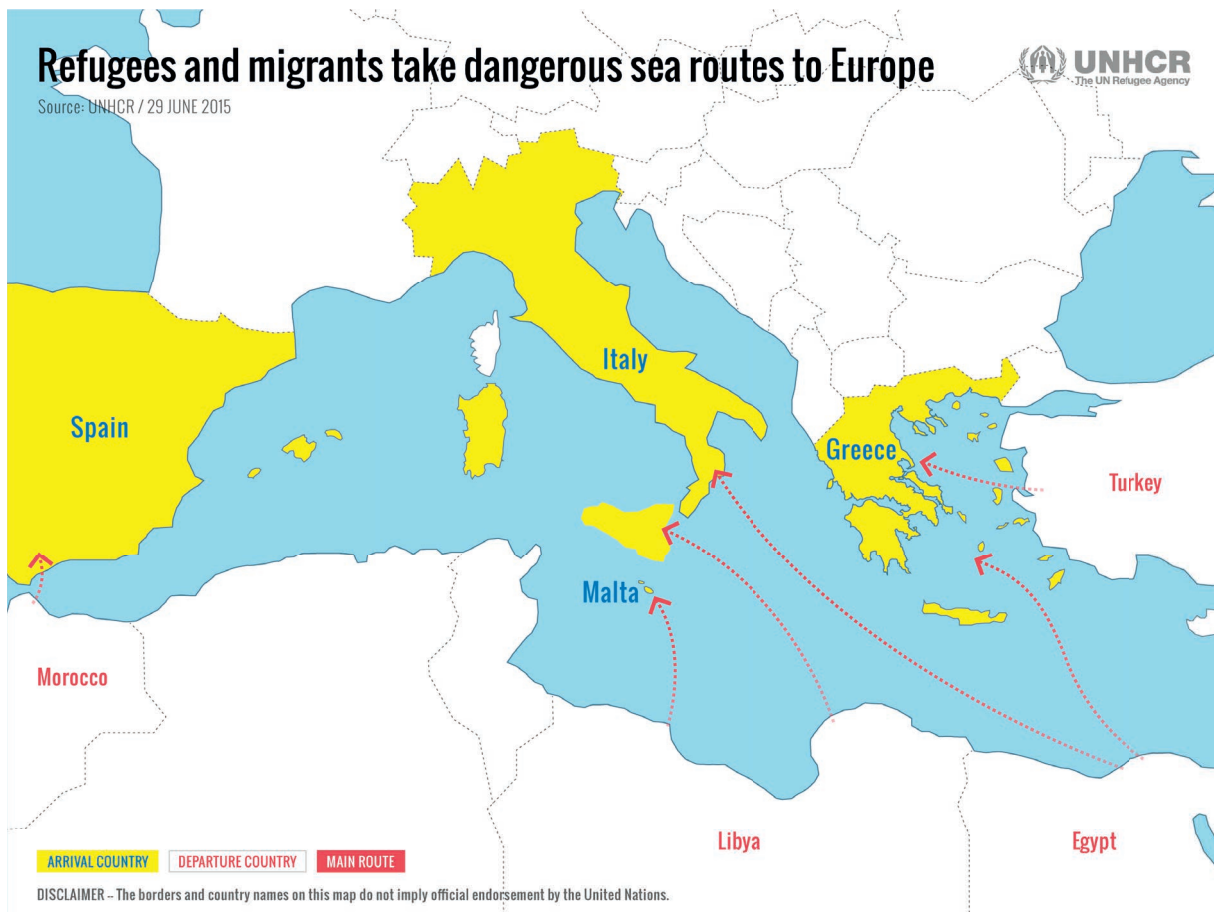
During the first four months of 2015, the numbers of those dying at sea reached horrifying new heights. Between January and March, 479 refugees and migrants drowned or went missing, as opposed to 15 during the first three months of the year before. In April the situation took an even more terrible turn. In a number of concurrent wrecks, an unprecedented 1,308 refugees and migrants drowned or went missing in a single month (compared to 42 in April 2014), sparking a global outcry.

European leaders held emergency meetings in April and agreed to triple the funding of their Frontex-led operations in the Mediterranean (bringing it to the levels of Mare Nostrum), and significantly increase their scope and coverage. This included the deployment of naval vessels from several EU States.

These efforts are supplemented by many private and non-governmental initiatives, including operations by Migrant Offshore Aid Station (MOAS) and Médecins Sans Frontières.

The results were immediate. In May, the number of refugees and migrants drowned or missing at sea fell to 68, a quarter of the figure only one year earlier (226). The downward trend continued in June, which as of 29 June saw 12 deaths, compared to 305 in 2014.

This decline in deaths at sea is an important achievement, and a sign that with the right policy, backed by an effective operational response, it is possible to save lives at sea. Europe is rising to the challenge, as it has done on multiple occasions since the end of World War II. Yet there is a continued need for vigilance. Even one death at sea is one death too many. For the thousands of refugees and migrants who continue to cross the Mediterranean, the risks remain very real.





A child sleeps outside the screening centre at Moria, on the Greek island of Lesbos. UNHCR/Socrates Baltagiannis

3. The rise of the eastern Mediterranean route: the shift to Greece

Until 2015, the rise in Mediterranean Sea arrivals was felt primarily in Italy. Over the course of 2014, it received more than three quarters of all maritime refugees and migrants (170,000). In the same year, 43,500 people arrived in Greece, or less than one fifth of the total.

In 2015, that picture has changed. During the first six months of 2015, 67,500 people arrived in Italy, while 68,000 arrived on the islands of Greece – overtaking Italy as the primary point of arrival, and already surpassing the numbers for whole of 2014. This shift attracted growing media

attention as tourists headed to the Greek islands for their summer holidays, and shone a new light on deeply inadequate reception facilities.

While the central and eastern Mediterranean Sea routes have become comparable in size, the profile of the people taking these routes diverges significantly.

The main countries of origin arriving in Italy were Eritrea (25 per cent), Nigeria (10 per cent) and Somalia (10 per cent), followed by Syria (7 per cent) and Gambia (6 per cent). The main countries of origin of refugees and migrants arriving in Greece were Syria (57 per cent), followed by Afghanistan (22 per cent) and Iraq (5 per cent).

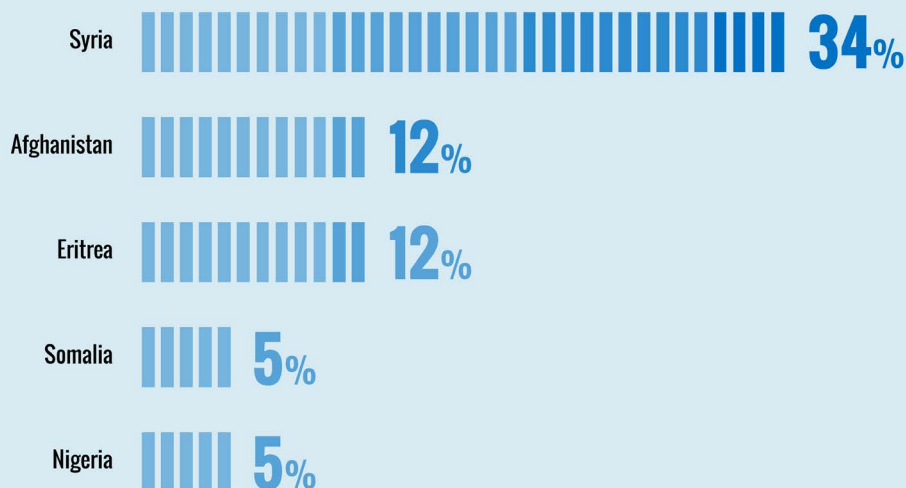
Overall, the majority of arrivals were refugees.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS OF 2015 SURVEY OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN GREECE

- **The majority of those questioned were Arab (78%) Sunni (87%) men (83%), between the age of 18-35 (71%). 40% were university educated, and another 46% had secondary education. Around half (45%) were married, and 44% had children.**
- **60% said they had previously spent time in Turkey (31% had no reply to this question), often in hotels and hostels. Two thirds of those questioned said they had received no assistance there, and the majority had left because of unemployment, and a lack of financial assistance.**
- **90% wanted to find asylum somewhere else in the EU, mostly in Germany and Sweden, for better assistance and employment opportunities. More than half intended to apply for family reunification once they arrived.**
- **The majority of Syrians waiting to be registered said they were treated well. Nonetheless, conditions were very difficult. Almost 20% didn't have regular access to a toilet and 70% did not regularly receive hygiene items. 30% had no mattress to sleep on, more than half had no access to a shower or blankets.**

Top 5 nationalities arriving by sea in Europe

Source: UNHCR / 29 JUNE 2015



UNACCOMPANIED AND SEPARATED CHILDREN

In 2015, 8% all refugees and migrants arriving in Italy were unaccompanied and separated children. This included 9% of those arriving from Eritrea, and 10% of Somalis: the two top countries of origin. Their situation warrants particular concern, requiring specific reception arrangements and care. Most unaccompanied and separated children leave the reception centres, which raises concerns over their wellbeing and protection. Italian national legislation offers a wide range of guarantees to unaccompanied children, but there are shortcomings in its implementation, some deep-seated, and legislative reforms and stronger governance at central level is needed.

Unaccompanied and separated children arriving by sea in Greece face significant challenges due to the lack of adequate reception arrangements. Due to poor conditions most quickly leave from official reception facilities. No central authority has been established to deal with their needs. Despite some improvements since 2013, measures to protect them remain inadequate and in urgent need of reform.

3.1 The Syrian crisis reaches Greece

Such large flows of refugees and migrants are a relatively recent phenomenon in Greece, which has not built the infrastructure and services to address the basic needs of the people arriving. This has created tremendous strain on the island communities who receive them. In most locations reception conditions were already insufficient, and the authorities face multiple constraints in responding to the new rise in arrivals. Greece needs support to be able to rapidly improve its reception and asylum capacity to match ever-growing needs. Greece needs more assistance to address these challenges.

In 2012, Greece attempted to control the rising number of land crossings by building a security fence on the border with Turkey. Sea-borne arrivals began to rise significantly thereafter. In 2013 the number of refugees and migrants arriving on the Greek islands more than tripled from 3,600 to 11,400; in 2014 it almost quadrupled again to 43,500. In the first six months of 2015, that peak has already been surpassed by more than 55 per cent.

Most are fleeing the war in Syria. Almost 40,000 people of Syrian origin arrived in Greece in the first six months of 2015, concentrated on the North Aegean islands of Lesbos, Chios and Samos, and in the Dodecanese islands of Kos and Leros.

In April, UNHCR conducted surveys to learn more about the challenges facing Syrian refugees in Greece, and released the preliminary results in June, based on 670 of a planned 3,500 interviews. The picture is one of people undergoing a deep and abiding struggle to survive, and who face even further hardship as they continue on their journey.



A young Afghan girl shelters inside an abandoned hotel in Kos. UNHCR/Socrates Baltagiannis

3.2 Growing pressure in Italy

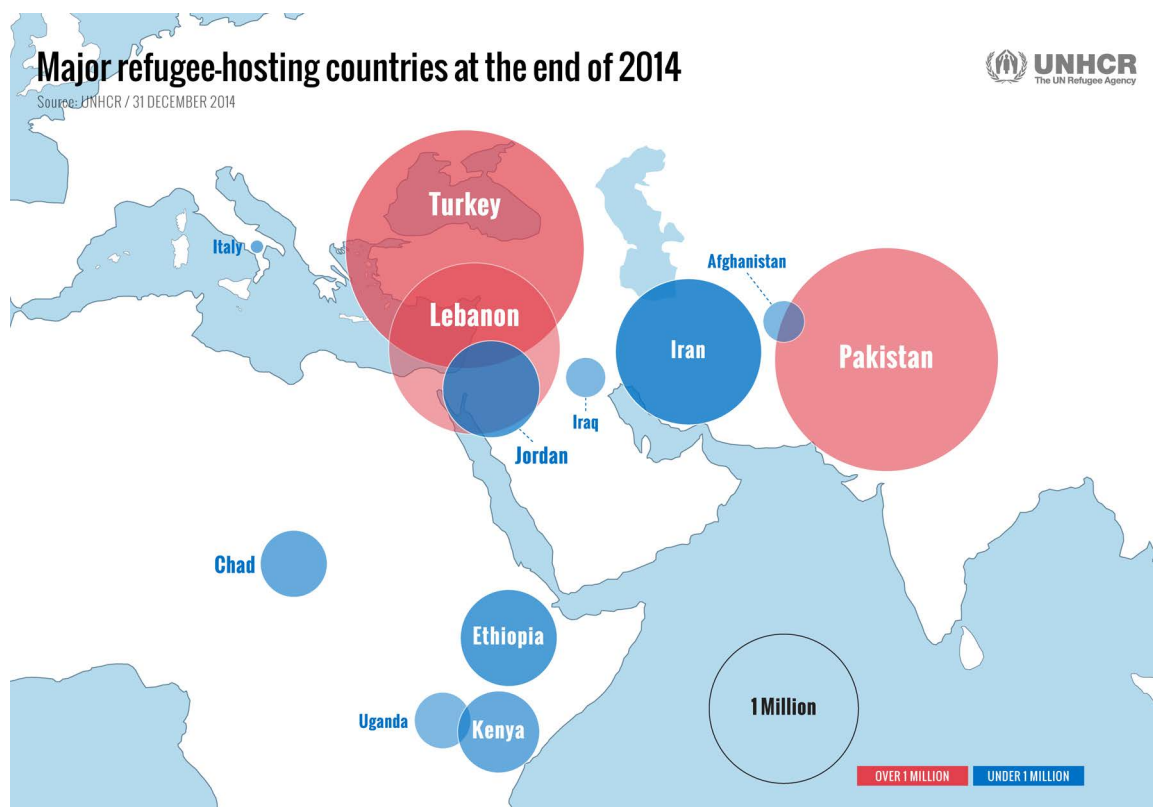
In 2011, Italy experienced a staggering increase in arrivals – 62,700, up from 4,500 the year before. After dipping in 2012, the numbers started rising again in 2013 (43,000) and reached a new peak in 2014 (170,000). This year it looks set to break records again.

Italy's Mare Nostrum operation was a remarkable effort to rescue people at sea, and resulted in saving thousands of lives. Nonetheless, it soon became apparent that Italy could not handle this crisis alone. With the return of a robust European search-and-rescue operation in May 2015, deaths at sea have fallen considerably.

Attention is now shifting to the situation of people once they safely arrive. Significant improvements in the identification, registration and reception systems need to be put in place.

The reception system has struggled to meet growing needs, despite a major increase in capacity of up to 80,000 places. Conditions in reception centres vary and places are limited in comparison to numbers of arrivals.

In 2014, 62,000 people applied for asylum in Italy. It is believed that the majority came by sea. Most Eritreans and Syrians, who comprised almost half of the arrivals in 2014, do not stay in Italy (often refusing to be fingerprinted by authorities), but instead move further north.





Refugees and migrants from Iraq sleep outside of Kos police station. UNHCR/Socrates Baltagiannis

4. The onward journey

The majority of refugees and migrants coming to southern Europe do so with the intention of travelling onwards. The countries of northern and western Europe, particularly Sweden and Germany, are perceived as offering more effective protection, better support for asylum-seekers, a more welcoming environment, and easier prospects for integration. In addition, they are often already home to members of their families and communities.

In the first half of 2015, Italy saw 67,500 arrivals by sea. In that time, only 28,500 of those people applied for asylum. In Greece, an even higher number of refugees arrived with the intention of leaving. In the first half of 2015, 68,000 people arrived by sea in Greece, yet through the end of May, only 5,115 had applied for asylum.

The onward movement of refugees and migrants from Greece requires long and dangerous journeys, often at the hands of smugglers, through the Balkans and onwards through Hungary.

The number of those moving through this route has sharply increased since the beginning of June, with over 1,000 people crossing every day from Greece through The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia to Serbia. Many men, women and children have faced widespread abuse and violence along the way by smugglers and criminal networks. Prior to recent changes in the law, refugees and migrants crossing The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia were not authorized to use public transport, and as a result, they have been walking on the railway tracks and walking or cycling along the emergency lane of the highway, resulting in various tragic accidents. A new law allows people to travel legally in the country for up to 72 hours after registering and receiving documentation.

The Governments concerned have requested international support to ensure that the protection and humanitarian needs of the refugees and migrants are being addressed, in particular in the area of reception, asylum and migration management. The situation remains critical and will require further support, including through joint efforts with the European Union, national governments and NGOs.



A group of refugees and migrants aboard a dinghy boat approach a beach on the island of Lesbos. UNHCR/Socrates Baltagiannis

5. The European response

As the number of refugees coming to Europe's southern border has risen, so has the pressure on EU countries to share the responsibility to protect them more equitably, and increase solidarity among EU Member States.

Two internal imbalances have arisen. The first is an imbalance in arrivals, with Italy and Greece facing the large majority of all sea-borne landings. The second is an imbalance in destination. In 2014, Germany and Sweden received 43 per cent of all asylum applications in the EU. This is not sustainable.

Recent years have also seen growing concern over a third imbalance, in which the industrialised world

is receiving only a relatively small part of the growing numbers of global refugees, whilst less developed countries come under ever-increasing pressure.

This has come alongside a rise in anti-foreigner rhetoric and xenophobia in several European countries, including those traditionally welcoming to refugees. In addition, restrictive policies have been introduced in some European countries, such as fence-building and push-backs. UNHCR is concerned that such practices place refugees at risk, pushing them into the hands of smugglers or simply redirecting their movement. In 2015, European policy towards refugees and migrants is in the spotlight as never before.

UNHCR has called on Europe to focus on several areas:

Rescued refugees and migrants wait to disembark. UNHCR/Francesco Malavolta



1. Saving lives at sea: Continuing a robust search-and-rescue operation in the Mediterranean. The historic tragedies this past April galvanized a continent-wide debate on how to meet countries' obligation to rescue people at sea. The EU responded with concrete action which included a tripling of funding for rescue operations. Sharp drops in maritime deaths in May and June suggest that the response is working, but the danger is far from over.

2. Dignified reception conditions: Providing improved and uniform conditions of reception throughout the EU. Poor reception conditions and lack of capacity creates precarious conditions, fuels tension with local communities, and contributes to onward movement. This problem is not new and needs to be urgently addressed by EU Member States.

3. Ensuring greater solidarity within Europe: Imbalances in arrivals and destination have created growing pressure for an EU-wide response to share asylum requests more equitably. The European Council decision on a relocation programme for 40,000 Syrian and Eritrean asylum-seekers is an important step along the way to finding answers to significant arrivals of refugees on European shores, and the participation of all Member States will be key to its success. It is hoped that this measure will be expanded to address rapidly evolving needs, and the fact that an increased proportion of sea arrivals is now taking place in Greece. The Council decision can help to alleviate pressure on Italy and Greece, but also needs to be accompanied by a better functioning of the Common European Asylum System, including the Dublin Regulation. In addition, UNHCR has long recognised the importance of return programmes for people not in need of international protection to preserve the integrity of asylum systems, and this should be done in line with fundamental rights and respect for the principle of non-refoulement.

4. Increasing legal avenues to safety: The Agenda on Migration includes a proposal for

20,000 more places for resettlement, which has received the support of the European Council. UNHCR urges Member States to make concrete commitments towards this goal, in addition to existing resettlement quotas. UNHCR is also calling for EU countries to provide more places for people in need of protection through alternative mechanisms, such as family reunification, humanitarian admission, private sponsorship schemes, and work and education visas.

5. Collective action in response to the global displacement crisis: Increased cooperation is critically needed to address root causes of refugee and migrant movements, such as conflict, insecurity, and lack of access to education and livelihoods. In the context of forced displacement, finding political solutions to conflicts and human rights violations, together with increasing development cooperation, are critically needed. Furthermore, major humanitarian operations such as for Syrian refugees being hosted in the Middle East, are dramatically underfunded. Through more targeted assistance, including development initiatives, the resilience and self-reliance of refugees and internally displaced populations could be strengthened, allowing them to live their lives with hope and dignity.

These are crucial first steps to deal with the rising global displacement crisis. In the longer-term, however, more will be needed. The rise in forced displacement has become a global challenge, on a scale not seen since the end of the Second World War. It demands a commensurate response.

Bold thinking is needed to design a system capable of tackling what increasingly looks like the new normal. It requires a comprehensive approach, balancing state responsibilities with regional and global solidarity, and bringing in not just those traditionally involved in protection, security and border control, but multiple actors.

In times of conflict, fences and borders will not stop people fleeing for their lives. They will come. The question facing the international community is not whether to engage with this crisis, but how best to address it, and how humanely.

