
Europe: Over one million refugees reached Europe by sea in 2015

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UNHCR's latest figures show that some 1,000,573 people had reached Europe across the Mediterranean, mainly to Greece and Italy, in 2015. Of these, 3,735 were missing, believed drowned.

The landmark figure, which was reached late on December 29, also indicated that 84 per cent of those arriving in Europe came from the world's top 10 refugee producing countries, strengthening UNHCR's belief that most of the people arriving in Europe were fleeing war and persecution.

"Over one million people have landed on Europe's shores, fleeing war and persecution, seeking a better life for their families," said Vincent Cochetel, UNHCR Director of the Bureau for Europe. "Tragically, over 3,700 other children, women and men did not survive the perilous journey by sea and their hope for a fresh start died with them."

"If there were more legal avenues for refugees to reach Europe, perhaps some of those who died at sea could have found peace and safety instead. For the refugees who risked everything and have now safely reached Europe, we hope they will be received in the context of the European values of dignity, solidarity, and human rights, so that they may find their new beginning," Cochetel added.

In addition to the sea crossings, recent figures also estimated that a further 34,000 have crossed from Turkey into Bulgaria and Greece by land.

The number of people displaced by war and conflict is currently the highest seen in Western and Central Europe since the Balkan crises of the 1990s, when several conflicts broke out in the former Yugoslavia.

One-in-every-two of those crossing the Mediterranean this year – half a million people – were Syrians escaping the war in their country. Afghans accounted for 20 per cent and Iraqis for seven per cent.

"As anti-foreigner sentiments escalate in some quarters, it is important to recognize the positive contributions that refugees and migrants make to the societies in which they live and also honour core European values: protecting lives, upholding human rights and promoting tolerance and diversity," said UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres.

Despite strong winds and choppy waves, on December 30 dozens of families continued to land on the Greek island of Lesbos in overstuffed inflatable boats designed to carry just eight people. One boat arrived carrying 69 refugees from Afghanistan.

"Everybody was traumatised and shaken up from being at sea for so long," said Shirlene Afshar, a UNHCR field protection officer working on Lesbos. "As I was helping people off the boat they were crying but also thankful to have arrived safely."

Over 800,000 refugees and migrants came via the Aegean Sea from Turkey into Greece, accounting for 80 per cent of the people arriving irregularly in Europe by sea this year. At the same time, the number of people crossing from North Africa into Italy dropped slightly, from 170,000 in 2014 to around 150,000 in 2015.

The number of people crossing the Mediterranean increased steadily from around 5,500 in January to reach a monthly peak in October of over 221,000.

After an initial chaotic reaction which resulted in tens of thousands of people moving from Greece through the Western Balkans and northwards, and finding themselves blocked at various borders, a more coordinated European response is beginning to take shape.

UNHCR launched an emergency response to support and complement European efforts. Over 600 emergency staff and resources were deployed to 20 different locations, providing life-saving assistance and protection, and advocating for human rights and access to asylum – particularly for refugees with specific needs, such as unaccompanied children and women-headed households.

Much more needs to be done, however, to reinforce the required reception capacity at the points of entry, to allow for the humane and effective accommodation, assistance, registration and screening of people arriving every day – to identify those who are in need of protection, those that should be relocated to other countries within the European Union, and those who do not qualify for refugee protection and for whom effective and dignified return mechanisms have to be put in place.

At the same time, UNHCR continues to call for safe, regular ways for refugees to find safety through more resettlement and humanitarian admission programmes, more flexible visa arrangements, more private sponsorship programmes and other possibilities.