

Why refugees, and other migrants, will remain a priority in our news

50 million people have become displaced in the past year. This is the highest number since World War 2. 16 million of these are refugees, that is, outside their country. (The UNHCR statistics for January-June 2014 show 330,700 asylum seekers made claims in the 44 industrialised nations, a 24% rise on the same period for 2013). The 28 EU states registered 216,300 asylum applications between January and June 2014, a 23% increase.

The Syrian Arab Republic was the main country of origin of asylum seekers in this period. 42,000 claimed asylum in this period. (The leading 5 industrial countries receiving asylum seekers from all countries are Germany, United States, France, Sweden, Turkey (UNHCR).)

Asylum seekers from Syria do not automatically meet the 1951 Geneva Convention definition of a refugee. At the Churches Refugee Network Annual Conference, Dr Alexander Betts of the Oxford Refugees Studies Centre explained how the criteria for a refugee drawn up in the post-WW2 circumstances do not meet the needs of millions of people now, including those fleeing Syria. (He also noted that in the UK there are 120,000 refugees, which is 1% of the global total.)

Yarmouk, the suburb of Damascus where more than 150,000 Palestinians had been settled, illustrates the restricted eligibility for refugee status, even if victims of conflict. Until 3 years ago, Palestinian Arabs were integrated into Syria, living alongside Syrians in Yarmouk. Now Yarmouk is a 'refugee camp', a 'prison' (The Guardian, 5 March 2015), and most tellingly, a 'Refugee camp turned killing field' (The Guardian, 11 April 2015). The Free Syrian Army entered Yarmouk in 2012, and so this settled community became a front-line in Syria's civil war. The disastrous conditions resulting from the siege by Syrian forces include loss of water, food and electricity, now made worse by the infiltration of Isis. (A Palestinian academic is quoted as saying *'I think sometimes that we do not belong to this world, that the Palestinians are not part of humanity'*.)

Syrians fleeing the region are among those trying to get across the Mediterranean in boats. Italy has registered 10,165 migrants arriving on the shores between January and March of this year; its coastguards rescued a further 2,000 from the sea through naval operations during the first weekend of this April. Syrians are among the 4 countries with more than one thousand of those rescued from the sea this year (all statistics from the International Organisation for Migration – IOM).

Although people migrating by boat include both migrants and asylum seekers – mixed migration – the stated reason for withdrawing the Mare Nostrum search and rescue operation was that the operation was a 'pull factor'. The UK Government agreed with other European countries that the so-called 'pull-factor' justified replacing Mare Nostrum with the 'scaled down' Operation Triton, focused on border control as well as rescue. *'If*

they're economic migrants then how do we explain that after every outbreak of violence and repression we get a new wave of people from the area that's just had that outbreak? (Leonard Doyle, IOM representative. The Observer 4 January 2015). (This smuggling of people across the Mediterranean reached a new level of danger when boats abandoned by the crews, 'ghost ships', appeared off the Italian coast in January).

Calais and the 1,500 migrants taking their chance to get across the channel represent the consequence of a European failing to permit legal ways of entering EU countries. The appalling conditions of the camp at Calais make it easier to see people there as wanting to get to the UK as a 'soft touch'. But many there are fleeing persecution, want to find family in the UK, speak good English, bring high-level qualifications the UK could use, and want to work. It has become again the scene of a major humanitarian effort to provide water and services to prevent widespread disease – a situation described as 'one of the worst refugee camps in the world'.

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