

The Crisis in Syria and the Policies of the European Union and the Republic of Cyprus on Syrian Refugees

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1. The Syria conflict has caused one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent history. Throughout 2013, an average of 4,600 people fled Syria every single day. There are now over 2.6 million registered Syrian refugees in the region. If the current trend continues, there could be over 4 million registered Syrian refugees by the end of this year.
2. Within Syria itself, the lives and futures of more than 9.3 million people directly affected by conflict hang in the balance. With some 3.5 million Syrians living in areas under siege or unable to be reached with humanitarian assistance, the innocent civilians of Syria seem to be surviving on sheer courage and determination.
3. UNHCR and other humanitarian organisations have been doing all they can to save lives and alleviate suffering even in the face of great danger to, and sacrifice by, their staff on the ground. UNHCR leads a regional coordination effort of over 100 partner organizations, who together have appealed for 4.2 billion US Dollars to assist the refugees and their host communities throughout 2014. Our partners include other UN agencies, national and international NGOs, government agencies and civil society.
4. But it is the five neighbouring countries - Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt - that have made the most fundamental contribution of all in the humanitarian response to the Syria refugee crisis, at great expense to their own economies and societies.

5. With one million refugees, Lebanon has felt the brunt of the Syria conflict. Turkey and Jordan are both hosting over half a million refugees each; Iraq and Egypt are also carrying a significant burden.
6. If the flow of people seeking safety in Lebanon continues, there could be over 1.6 million registered Syrian refugees in the country by the end of this year. But even now, Lebanon already has the highest per-capita concentration of refugees of any country in recent history. Twenty-five percent of the Lebanese population today is Syrian.
7. Syria's neighbours have thus demonstrated impressive generosity to refugees, but the sheer scale of the influx has created a staggering burden on their social services, infrastructure and ability to respond. They need strong financial assistance, not only for immediate humanitarian priorities, but also for the structural, longer-term development needs the crisis has created.
8. They also need Europe and the other industrialized countries to take in some of the refugees they are hosting. In this respect, UNHCR has called upon these countries to support the relocation of up to 30,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2014, focusing upon the most vulnerable. UNHCR's goal is to have humanitarian admission places for an additional 100,000 Syrian refugees in 2015 and 2016.
9. The numbers Syrians who have come to Europe to seek asylum are comparatively low and manageable in relation to those in countries in the region surrounding Syria. So far, less than 4% of Syrians who have fled the conflict have sought safety in the European Union. Turkey alone has received ten times as many Syrians as the entire European Union.

10. Some 60% of all Syrian applicants in the European Union have claimed asylum in only two countries – Sweden and Germany. This is not surprising given the vastly different standards across the Union. Reception conditions are sub-standard in a number of EU countries, including the sometimes excessive use of detention. The type of protection and associated rights granted to Syrians in the EU also vary considerably. Whereas some States mostly recognize Syrians as refugees, many others predominantly grant them subsidiary protection, and still others a mere temporary leave to remain on humanitarian grounds. We are also very much concerned by the lack of adequate integration support – if any – to Syrian and other refugees in several EU countries.
11. In 2013, only one Syrian was granted refugee status in Cyprus. More were given subsidiary protection, but a significant number of applications have remained unprocessed altogether. UNHCR believes that most Syrians who are victimized by persecution in the on-going conflict would fulfill the criteria set out in the 1951 Refugee Convention and should be recognized and protected under that instrument, rather than being relegated to a subsidiary protection scheme that may not ensure a sufficient measure of stability and certainty, including through provisions which respect the fundamental principle of family unity.
12. Detention is another area where UNHCR has had serious concerns in Cyprus. Many Syrians have been detained for unlawful entry or stay in the country, and in some cases following prosecution and conviction for attempting to leave the country with fraudulent documents. Others have been detained after having served a prison term for minor offences such as traffic violations.

13. The use of detention against refugees and asylum-seekers on account of their illegal entry or presence in the country of asylum is, in the view of UNHCR, inherently undesirable. Freedom from arbitrary detention is a fundamental human right, and the use of detention is, in many instances, contrary to established norms and principles of international law. The right to seek and enjoy asylum is, equally, recognized as a basic human right. The act of illegal entry or presence on the territory of a State in order to seek asylum can therefore not be considered an offence or a crime. Even where the detention of a person may be in accordance with and authorized by a State's immigration law, that does not necessarily make it justified.

14. In conclusion, my main message is that Syrians are fleeing one of the worst conflicts the world has seen in decades, and many of them have been subjected to unspeakable human rights violations and persecution in their home country. Giving these refugees a safe way into Europe, protecting them when arriving at Europe's borders, and helping families torn apart by the war to reunite should be a humanitarian and human rights imperative for all. This is the second best thing we can do. The first best course of action is, of course, to end this terrible, tragic war.

Thank you.
