

Refugees on the Move

Peace & Justice (Scotland)



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June 2021



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1. Purpose

This briefing paper reviews the risks and vulnerability of refugees on the move and argues that the UK government and other international actors should increase access for refugees to safe routes to reach the UK and EU, and allow people to claim asylum where they are so that they are not forced to attempt perilous journeys.

2. Introduction and Analysis

People flee their home countries for different reasons. Recurrent natural disasters, scarce public resources, war, famine and external factors including colonisation and its legacy all play an important role in the generation of involuntary movements and the refugee crisis.¹ UNHCR estimates that of the nearly 80 million people worldwide who are displaced, – nearly 46 million – are Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and there are nearly 27 million refugees around the world.

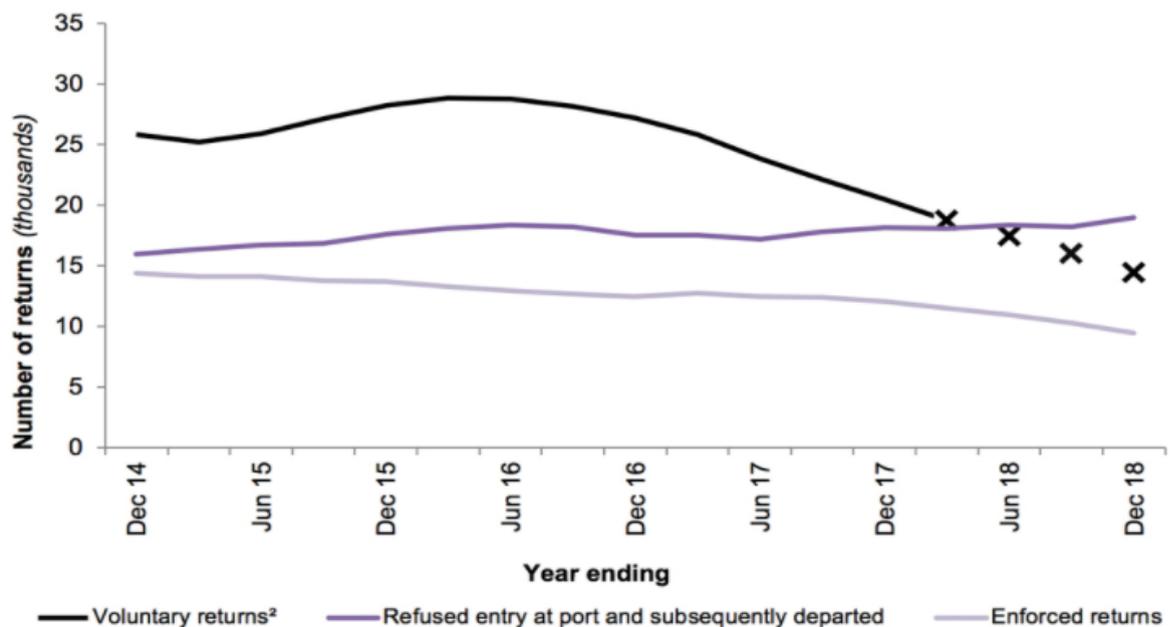


Source: Ggia via Wikimedia Commons

¹ Migration Data Portal, July 2020

Migrants often risk their lives and use unsafe routes to reach Europe, routes where they encounter violence and abuse, criminal people-smugglers, and perilous passage across deserts and at sea.² Upon arrival in destination countries they face detention and deportation. In 2018, 24,748 individuals entered the detention estate UK and over the same period, 25,487 left the detention estate. Of those leaving detention, 44% were returned from the UK to another country. There were 9,474 enforced returns from the UK in 2018. In the year ending December 2019, around 24,400 people entered detention of which 73 are children.³ In the UK, there is no statutory upper time limit for the period that an individual can be held in immigration detention.⁴ Therefore, detainees could be detained for an indefinite period of time.

Fig: 1 Different types of returns/deportations from the UK 2014-2018⁵



Currently, population movement, whatever its causes, is considered as a threat by the UK and other developed countries. Hence, governments fail to protect migrants who are vulnerable to further violence or deprivation. Safety is denied to those in need of protection, blind eyes and deaf ears are turned to the high risks of passage, and the remaining dignity and rights of refugees are crushed.

² Mediterranean migration

³ <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/immigration-detention-in-the-uk/>

⁴ <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/immigration-detention-in-the-uk/>

⁵ How many people are detained or returned? National statistics, February 2019

The mistreatment – and sometimes violence - caused by authorities en route can take many forms,⁶ leaving individuals stripped of their basic rights and adversely affected in their health and well-being.⁷ During these unsafe journeys many refugees have lost their lives, been raped, tortured and abused.

“Brokers raped the women and harassed them. They even wanted to sodomise the men. They would beat us and tie us up. If you said anything, they would kill you”⁸

“I was kidnapped and they held me for two weeks. This is where I became pregnant [by the kidnappers]”⁹

“The [Egyptian police] started firing their guns towards the boat to kill our driver. One of the refugee women was shot badly in the arm. She started screaming and so did the other women and children. We all started shouting out, “we are Somali, we are Sudanese, we are refugees, please do not shoot us!”...They then sent us into different buses and drove us to a prison centre”¹⁰

An estimated 2,275 people perished in the Mediterranean in 2018 – an average of six deaths every day.¹¹ Even when they reach Europe and the United Kingdom they are normally treated with suspicion and considered as a threat to the countries’ economic and social stability, and the ill treatment and violence continues.¹²

⁶ Nightmareish detention for migrants, asylum seekers, 21 January 2019

⁷ UNODC 2015 Combating violence against migrants

⁸ Testimonies of immigrants at Eritrean border who were on the move from author’s archive, 2018

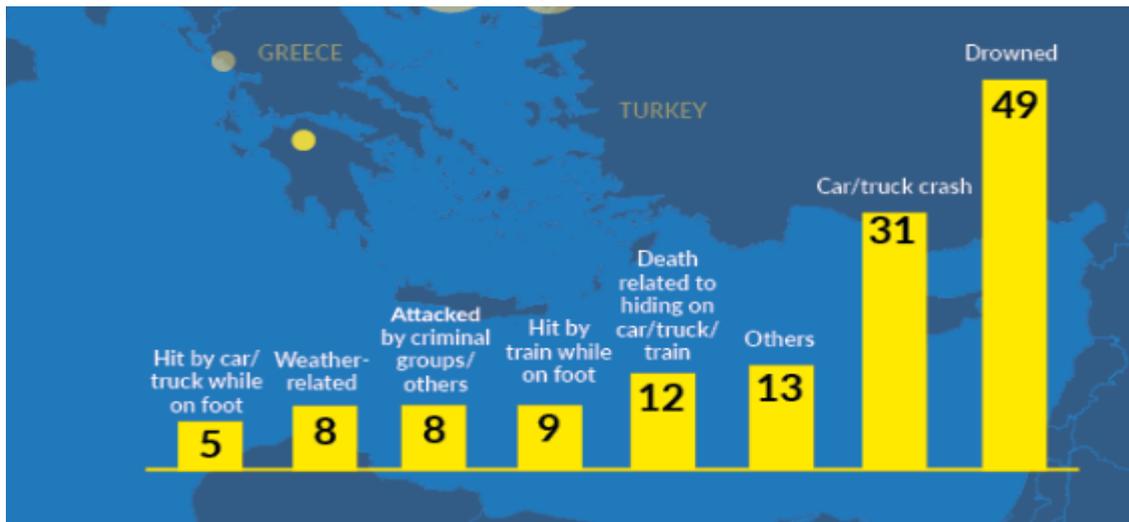
⁹ ibid

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ UNHCR DESPERATE JOURNEYS Refugees and migrants arriving in Europe and at Europe's borders JANUARY – DECEMBER 2018

¹²<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/nov/13/asylum-seekers-crossing-channel-face-inhumane-treatment-observers-say> and

Fig 2: Dead and Missing along land route



Source: UNHCR, *DESPERATE JOURNEYS Refugees and migrants arriving in Europe and at Europe's borders JANUARY – DECEMBER 2018*¹³

Resettlement is one of the durable solutions offered by UNHCR which is the transfer of refugees from a country where they have initially sought asylum - often in the same region as their country of origin - to a third state which has agreed to admit them. However, refugees' chances of entering and completing this process are small. Resettlement takes long periods of time. This delay is one of the main reasons many attempt to travel illegally (see below figure 1). Despite rampant violations of their rights enroute, refugees still hope for safety and freedom in the EU or UK and even refugees who were kidnapped and tortured the first time they attempted to migrate still try again and again.¹⁴ However, in an escalating process of border externalization geared towards preventing migrants from reaching their shores, the EU and UK, instead of improving resettlement options, choose to intervene to change the situation in refugee generating countries where high numbers of refugees are generated because of the conflict, natural disaster etc.

3. Calls to EU, UK and other international actors

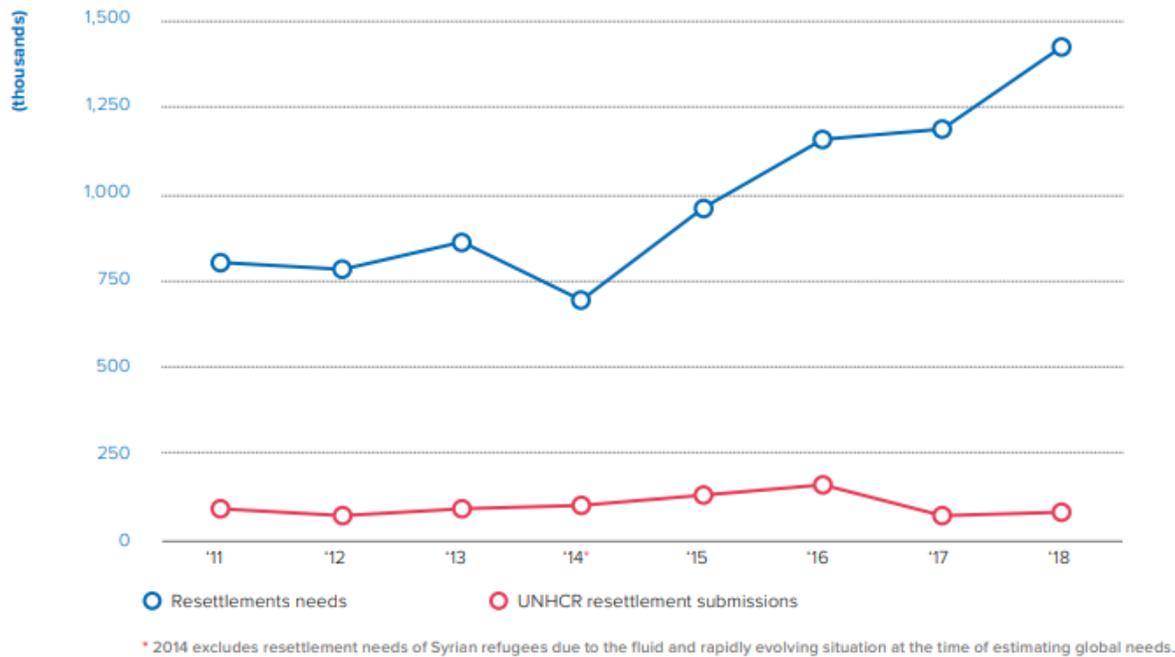
Migrants reaching the UK and EU have passed shoot-to-kill borders, avoided kidnapping, crossed the desert, and survived the Mediterranean; many have

¹³ Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/desperatejourneys/>

¹⁴ Journeys to Europe : The role of policy in migrant decision-making

endured hardships beyond imagination to reach the EU or UK. If the EU and UK truly respect migrant’s rights, they should increase safe and legal options to seek refuge, making much of the suffering redundant.

Fig 3: Gap between resettlement needs and UNHCR’s annual submissions | 2011-2018



Source: UNHCR global trends, forced displacement 2018¹⁵

The EU and UK instead make it more difficult for migrants to reach their border illegally without offering safe and legal alternatives. The EU and UK make payments to the refugee generating countries or the countries which refugees first enter to ‘solve the problems’ of the migration crisis.¹⁶ However, refugees still pay smugglers/traffickers who pay government officials to get refugees past checkpoints, borders, and fences en route to detention, only to face torture in detention camps.¹⁷ In extreme cases government officials have reportedly sold refugees to traffickers themselves. In its attempt to “fight/tackle” smuggling and trafficking and keep refugees and migrants from reaching European shores, governments fund barbed wire fences, border patrol forces, and detention centres, forcing migrants to be dependent upon whoever will help them circumvent these barriers – including people traffickers, increasing their vulnerability while on the move.

¹⁵ Available at: <https://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2018/>

¹⁶ <https://peaceandjustice.org.uk/publications/legal-issues-surrounding-the-eu-turkey-migration-deal/>.

¹⁷ Nightmarish detention for migrants, asylum seekers, 21 January 2019

4. Recommendations

The UK government should:

- Create safe and legal routes through allowing migrants to claim asylum from wherever they are. (Enhance access to safe and legal pathways by further increasing resettlement pledges)
- Treat migrants who reach the border humanely and protect their fundamental rights.
- Provide access to asylum procedures.
- End the practice of indefinite detention.
- End the detention of children for immigration purposes and ensure early identification of asylum-seeking unaccompanied and separated children.
- Accept its fair share of unaccompanied asylum seeking children.

*This paper was prepared for Peace & Justice (Scotland)
by Meklite Alemayehu Balcha,
on a student work placement from University of Bradford, 2021*