



# Urgent action needed on European Refugee Crisis

IRC Situational Briefing - 23 February 2016

*Flows of refugees into Europe show no sign of abating. In January 2016 alone, 65,775 men, women and children travelled treacherous seas to find sanctuary in Europe, more than in July last year.<sup>1</sup> As a result of chronic conflict, persecution, and human rights abuses in origin countries, the UNHCR predicts 1 million will travel to Europe in 2016. Europe has shown itself to be ill-equipped to respond to this crisis. As a result of a lack of coordinated and humane response by Europe, thousands of refugees fleeing violence and persecution continue to lose their lives and their dignity. This is desperate situation and reflects a shamefully inadequate response. Addressing this challenge is not beyond reach, but European states must take urgent action now.*

## The IRC's humanitarian work in Europe

In addition to working in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the IRC has emergency staff working in Greece and Serbia. The IRC is working on the Greek island of Lesbos operating a transit site on the northern coast to provide food, dry clothes, services and safe transportation to arriving refugees. The IRC is delivering clean water and sanitation, providing information to newly arrived refugees, and delivering specialised services to the most vulnerable refugees. In Serbia, the IRC is supporting local organisations to provide basic aid and critical information regarding registration and onward travel to desperate refugees on their journey through Europe.

### Urgent action is needed in five areas:

1. **Prepare to humanely and effectively receive and manage 1 million refugee arrivals this year, including via new 'hotspots'**
2. **As increased numbers of women and children arrive, provide specialised protection services for the most vulnerable groups**
3. **End discrimination based on nationality to ensure fair and thorough refugee status determination procedures for all nationalities**
4. **Avoid unilateral border closures and containment that will fuel humanitarian crises**
5. **Deliver on a funding mechanism for humanitarian response in Europe and make more funding available**

### 1. Prepare to humanely receive and manage 1 million refugee arrivals this year, including via new 'hotspots' and effective relocation mechanisms

- (a) Since only the start of 2016, 403 men, women and children have died crossing the seas to Europe.<sup>2</sup> This is a desperate situation that is avoidable. The EU has the tools to facilitate safe and legal routes into Europe without abandoning its shared values or violating international and EU law. If further emphasis was made on providing safe and legal routes to Europe, such as resettlement or humanitarian visas, refugees would not be forced to make dangerous journeys.
- (b) The EU must support effective search and rescue operations to stop deaths at sea. Frontex and the Greek coastguard are increasingly locating boats off the coast of Lesbos and taking them directly to ports and the 'hotspot' registration centre at Moria. This has the potential to prevent deaths and increase the efficient management of refugee flows, but all agencies involved must have adequate training and support to humanely receive refugees who have made traumatic journeys. If refugees are taken directly to registration centres or

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR. <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, as of 18 February 2016. <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>

'hotspots', humanitarian response services, including specialised protection services for women and children, must be available at disembarkation points.

- (c) Conditions in 'hotspots', registration centres, and temporary shelters, while improved, remain insufficient and are not ready for the arrivals expected in 2016. Of five hotspots due to be set up for refugees arriving in Greece, four have been established in haste in recent days. Quick establishment must not result in inhumane treatment. Refugees must be properly received when they arrive in Europe, and EU member states should provide the Greek government with any support needed to assure this.
- (d) The pace of progress with enacting relocation pledges is very slow. So far only 583 people have been relocated – 295 from Greece and 288 from Italy.<sup>3</sup> This is a fraction of the 160,000 that was agreed by EU last year.<sup>4</sup> If relocation continues at the current speed it will take more than 100 years to achieve the planned relocation. Relocation schemes must take refugees wishes into account and be accompanied by integration measures. If this system can be shown to be more effective, this provides an opportunity for a coordinated mechanism for management of refugees within Europe.
- (e) Many EU states can and must accept increased numbers of refugees. Current EU relocation schemes are grossly inadequate for managing the numbers of refugees in Europe. Only 66,400 places have been allocated for relocation from Greece.<sup>5</sup> This is less than the number of arrivals into Greece over the past month alone. The future of the many arrivals not accounted for under relocation schemes is unclear. This situation requires an honest and urgent reassessment.

## **2. As increased numbers of women and children arrive, provide specialised protection services and support for the most vulnerable**

- (a) Women and children now make up 57% of those arriving across the Mediterranean Sea.<sup>6</sup> Last June, men had made up 73% of refugee flows. Our staff in Lesvos have reported increased numbers of arrivals are women travelling alone with children, and elderly people. Women and girls have specific protection needs as they are at risk of experiencing gender-based violence, targeted robberies, harassment and assault, and sexual exploitation and abuse.
- (b) There is an urgent need for improved specialised protection services for vulnerable groups such as unaccompanied minors, female-headed households, and those with disabilities. Currently there is a lack of prioritisation, funding, and clear accountability for delivery of vital services – such as safe spaces, designated shelters, and case management – for refugees. As a result, the capacity and services available to support vulnerable groups, including unaccompanied minors, is inadequate. Across Greece, safe accommodation is only available for 350 unaccompanied minors.
- (c) EU states should work better together to ensure vulnerable people are protected and not "lost" as they move between countries. There are reports of thousands of unaccompanied children "missing" in Europe.<sup>7</sup> Currently there exists no joined up mechanism for protection case management and referrals along migration routes. States should establish cross-border protection mechanisms where they do not exist, for example via a pan-European network of protection-focused agencies.
- (d) There are indications that increased numbers of women and children include those hoping to reunite with male family members. This outlines the importance of supporting refugees to reunite with relatives in Europe via family reunification mechanisms. Extended family reunion offers protection to vulnerable people by providing them a lifeline to safe haven.

## **3. End discrimination based on nationality to ensure fair and thorough refugee status determination procedures for all nationalities**

- (a) During registration processes in Lesvos, arrivals are separated into Syrian, Afghan and Iraqi; and all other nationalities. This should not result in unequal access to services nor differing refugee status determination

<sup>3</sup> Member States' Support to Emergency Relocation Mechanism, as of 16 February 2016. [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/press-material/docs/state\\_of\\_play\\_-\\_relocation\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/press-material/docs/state_of_play_-_relocation_en.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> European Commission. 22 September 2015. [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_STATEMENT-15-5697\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_STATEMENT-15-5697_en.htm)

<sup>5</sup> [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/press-material/docs/state\\_of\\_play\\_-\\_relocation\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/press-material/docs/state_of_play_-_relocation_en.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR, 17 February 2016, Winter Operations Cell Daily Report 17 February 2016, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>.

<sup>7</sup> EUROPOL, as reported by BBC 30 January 2016, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-35453589>

procedures. There are rumours that North African arrivals are detained, and after transport to Athens, deported, without the option to apply for asylum in Greece.

- (b) Discrimination based on nationality and ethnicity is taking place at borders. Since late last year, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Macedonia have denied entry to anyone other than nationals of Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan. This week concerning reports emerged that Afghans are now being denied entry into Serbia and Macedonia.
- (c) Nationality must not equate to refugee status, nor be the basis of arbitrary discriminatory decisions. Under international law, all nationalities must be granted their right to a fair and thorough status determination procedure based on their individual circumstances.

#### **4. Avoid border closures and containment that will perpetuate humanitarian crises**

- (a) The refugee crisis has resulted in a wave of unilateral border controls and closures. There is concern that changes to border controls, particularly in Germany, could set off further waves of closures. The establishment of daily quotas for refugees in Austria this week has resulted in the same in Slovenia, and may be linked with Croatia sending refugees back to Serbia. Closures between Greece and Macedonia may drive Greece to become a mass refugee camp.
- (b) Unilateral and arbitrary decisions by states, including decisions to close or restrict borders, only results in dangerous conditions for people on the move. Even the strictest border control efforts will not stop refugees coming - it will only make journeys even more dangerous and play into the hands of smugglers. The flow of refugees requires multilateral action, coordinated management, and a proper assessment of needs and required services along migratory routes.
- (c) Bottlenecks of people are more vulnerable to disease, smuggling, family separation, gender-based violence, and other human rights violations, and must be avoided. The situation along the Western Balkans route is dire. This requires humanitarian contingency planning for expanded infrastructure, with sufficient staff and supplies, in locations suited to hosting large numbers of vulnerable people.
- (d) Closing off routes to Europe will likely only lead to massive additional numbers of refugees in Turkey, which will exacerbate conditions and risk Turkey closing entry routes from Syria, trapping people in Syria where the horrors stemming from the violence are readily apparent.

#### **5. Deliver on a funding mechanism for European humanitarian response and make more funding available**

- (a) Last week the European Council took a vital and welcome first step to make urgently needed humanitarian funding available within the EU. The IRC looks forward to concrete EU Commission proposals to address the needs of the refugees in the EU, making full use of the expertise and skill of the EU Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection departments (ECHO) and in coordination with aid agencies on the ground. Funding for a humanitarian response within the EU should not be drawn from existing external funding, and must be swiftly disbursed to meet humanitarian needs.
- (b) Few European governments have provided aid directly to the NGOs responding on the ground, which means that NGOs, relying on private donations, are running out of money. UNHCR, IOM and partners have released a \$550m appeal for humanitarian operations in Europe that must be met.
- (c) The EU and member states' recent commitments to provide \$10 billion funding for the Syria response are much needed and should be highly commended. However, commitments cannot be used as an excuse to evade obligations to respond closer to home, nor seen as mechanism to facilitate or insist those states closest to Syria contain refugees. Responsibility for refugees cannot be defined by proximity.

For more information, please contact Rachel Maranto, [rachel.maranto@rescue-uk.org](mailto:rachel.maranto@rescue-uk.org), +44 207 462 3357 in London, and Anny Bhan, [Anny.Bhan@rescue.org](mailto:Anny.Bhan@rescue.org), +32 (0)2 511 43 00 or Lidia Giglio [lidia.giglio@rescue.org](mailto:lidia.giglio@rescue.org) +32 (0)2 511 43 00 in Brussels.