

Briefing

Scottish Parliament Debate on the Refugee Crisis, 15 September 2015

Introduction

Scottish Refugee Council is an independent charity providing advice and information to people seeking asylum and refugees living in Scotland, campaigning for their fair treatment, and speaking out on refugee issues.

This briefing sets out background information on the refugee crisis, what the UK Government response has been, what the Scottish Government response has been, and what we think the solutions are to the crisis.

What is driving the current crisis?

The world is facing a global refugee crisis on an unprecedented scale. 60 million people are now displaced from their homes by persecution, conflict, generalised violence, or human rights violations; half are women and girls. 86% of the world's refugees are hosted by developing regions, in countries such as Pakistan, Lebanon and Turkey. These three countries alone host 30% of the world's refugees.

In 2014, the UK received just 25,033 asylum applications. Germany has received eight times as many asylum applications as the UK, Hungary three times, and Sweden, France and Italy all received at least double the number of applications. The UK resettled just 645 refugees through its refugee resettlement programmes in 2014.

In an effort to tackle irregular migration, the UK and other EU states have heightened border controls overseas, which effectively prevent refugees from reaching our shores. With almost no legal avenues open to them, men, women and children are forced to take ever greater risks in their efforts to find safety. Some are taking deadly journeys across the Mediterranean, turning in desperation to unscrupulous smugglers. The tragic deaths of young Aylan Kurdi, his brother Galip, and his mother, Rhian, stemmed from this lack of routes to safety.

More than 350,000 people have crossed the Mediterranean so far this year, and more than 2500 have lost their lives trying. The borders of the EU have become the most dangerous in the world. The majority making the crossing are refugees, with 58% coming from Syria, Eritrea or Afghanistan alone.

What has the UK Government done to respond so far?

The UK Government has stated in its response to the current crisis that it has provided protection to 5000 Syrian refugees. It is important to note that the number of asylum applications to the UK has remained relatively constant over the last decade, and remain very low when compared to our EU neighbours. The UK has actually made it more difficult for Syrians to come here legally by dramatically reducing the proportion of visas it grants to Syrian nationals since the conflict began. In 2010 the UK approved 70% of visas for Syrian nationals; in 2014 this dropped to 40%.

After pressure from the public, from civil society, and from UK and Scottish Parliaments to participate in European programmes to resettle refugees from conflict regions to countries of safety, the UK Government established the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme (VPR), to resettle 'hundreds' of 'vulnerable' Syrian refugees across the UK. To date, 216 people have been resettled in the UK, including 11 families in Glasgow.

The outpouring of support and generosity from civil society, politicians, grassroots movements and the general public over the last few weeks in response to harrowing pictures of the suffering and

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loss of life at the borders of Europe has been truly inspiring. In response, the Prime Minister announced on 7 September that the UK would seek to expand existing programmes to resettle up to 20,000 Syrian refugees from camps neighbouring Syria over the next five years; that's just 0.1% of the 4 million Syrian refugees, 2 million of whom are children. The focus of the response has been to highlight UK aid spending in Syria and neighbouring countries, stating that providing aid to the camps and resettling refugees directly from Syria would prevent people making risky journeys to Europe.

In contrast to the UK Government's response, in just one day last week, Germany welcomed 10,000 refugees from its European neighbours. Despite pressure from opposition parties at Westminster in an emergency debate called by Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper on 8 September and an opposition debate led by the SNP on 9 September, the UK Government has refused to participate in proposals by the European Commission to relocate refugees already in Europe to ease the pressure on border states such as Greece, Italy and Hungary.

What has the Scottish Government done to respond so far?

The First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, reacted to the crisis and public outpouring of calls to welcome refugees by holding a summit in Edinburgh on 5 September, bringing together Ministers, opposition leaders, statutory bodies, refugee representatives and civic society. She announced that Scotland was ready to welcome 1000 refugees as a starting point and that she would set up a taskforce to coordinate Scotland's response to the crisis. The first meeting of the taskforce took place on the day of the Prime Minister's announcement and it will meet again on 15 September. Scotland is already well-prepared to take such a national, coordinated approach to resettling refugees across the country by having in place a national strategy to integrate refugees - [New Scots: Scotland's Refugee Integration Strategy](#). Scotland has a history of welcoming refugees in times of crisis, such as during the conflict in the Balkans in the 1990s.

Our reaction and what we think needs to happen

We welcome the leadership that the First Minister, Scottish Government, politicians across the UK, and civic society, have shown in offering to welcome refugees. We believe the crisis requires a coordinated, humanitarian, Europe-wide response. To prevent people making dangerous journeys to seek safety and rebuild their lives, the UK must provide safe and legal routes to protection. We cannot ignore those who have already made desperate journeys to Europe and we can and must take responsibility for a fair share of those men, women and children in need of protection. The UK Government must do more.

Solutions must also acknowledge the rights and experiences of the increasing number of women and children on the move and ensure a gendered response. Power relations impacting on the lives of women and girls are magnified in situations of flight and transit, putting them at greater risk of gender based violence and exploitation.

The UK Government should:

- **Afford full refugee status to Syrians resettled in the UK** through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Scheme and any other resettlement programmes
- **Grant full family reunion rights including to children** resettled in the UK through the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Scheme
- **Increase the number of refugee resettlement places** in line with our European neighbours as part of the EU-wide resettlement programme

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- **Review refugee family reunion policies** to allow family members to join relatives already in the UK (currently only spouses and dependent children under the age of 18 qualify for family reunion)
- **Open safe routes to the UK from overseas** providing humanitarian visas to enable people to get to safety (countries such as Austria, Denmark, Italy, the Netherlands and Spain have already done this)
- **Participate in the EU relocation scheme** to take a fair share of responsibility for refugees currently in Italy, Greece and Hungary so they can access the protection they need
- **Fully implement the family unity clause in EU regulations - called the 'Dublin III Regulations'** - governing which EU country should take responsibility for deciding someone's asylum claim.
- **Suspend returns under the Dublin regulations** so that no one is returned from the UK to another EU country for the purpose of deciding their asylum claim
- **Treat refugees arriving in the UK fairly and humanely** ensuring that they can access the asylum process, receive a fair hearing on their claim, are adequately supported to live a dignified life, and are not detained.

The Scottish Government should:

- **Continue to develop a coordinated national approach** for refugees resettled in Scotland
- **Ensure a consistency of welcome** across all of the local authorities and communities who have taken a stand to offer their assistance to refugees and may have little experience of supporting refugees
- **Push the UK government to participate in collective EU responses** to this crisis, including by playing its role in taking responsibility for refugees in Europe.

For further information contact:

Nina Murray
Women's Policy Development Officer
T. 0141 223 7993
E. nina.murray@scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk

Graham O'Neill
Policy Officer
T. 0141 223 7987
E. graham.o'neill@scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk