

THE 2015

Refugee Crisis

by Vida de Voss Links • photograph John Stanmeyer Illustration Simon Kneebone

THE CURRENT SITUATION WITH MIGRANTS AND REFUGEES IS EXPERIENCED WORLDWIDE YET ITS SCALE AND SEVERITY IS UNMATCHED SINCE WORLD WAR II.

There have always been refugees: people who are mostly forced from their home countries by conflict or repression, and who must find new homes and new lives elsewhere. In 2015 people are fleeing countries for economic or political reasons from Honduras and El Salvador, to Nigeria, Somalia, Gambia, Libya and Eritrea, to Afghanistan and Syria, Pakistan and Iraq to Myanmar and Bangladesh.

A distinction should be made between a “refugee” and a “migrant” though. According to the United Nations, refugees “are persons fleeing armed conflict or persecution”. Migrants “choose to move not because of a direct threat of persecution or death, but

mainly for economic reasons to improve the economic quality of their lives. The distinction is important because international law, including but not limited to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its additional 1967 Protocol, requires of states to give refuge to the former but not the latter.

The reality for refugees is that they leave behind family, friends, familiar places and customs. They go on uncertain journeys that may cost them their lives whilst worrying about the safety of those who remain behind. To mention but three instances of migrant casualties on their way to Europe: there have been reports that from January to September more than 2 600 who have lost their lives in the Mediterranean Sea en route to Europe, 71 migrants were found dead in a truck on an Austrian highway and 52 people were found dead in an airless boat in Sicily. The

transport – especially that provided by smugglers is often hazardous due to overcrowding but also the poor conditions of the boats and vehicles.

Refugees often, though not always, end up in camps. Life in the camps is often difficult, cramped, and unsafe, with few prospects for work or education. Camps are generally set up in an impromptu fashion and designed to only meet basic human needs. Due to crowding and lack of infrastructure some refugee camps are unhygienic, leading to a high incidence of infectious diseases including epidemics. Where people end up in refugee camps it generally means they don’t integrate into the local communities and can’t create stable, productive new lives there. At their worst, camps can keep families stuck in limbo for generations.

Zaatari is a refugee camp in Jordan, which is gradually evolving into a

Cartoon by Simon Kneebone



Photograph by John Stammeyer



Lebanon 1,3 million and Jordan 1 million people. The fragile economies of these countries are taking significant strain. This is a long-term problem that could be destabilising for the region and beyond if the billions being made available are not spent in a manner that addresses the root problems in working towards finding solutions. Writers such as Michael S Teitelbaum argues the generous support for temporary protection in the EU countries could do much to assist refugee camps in these neighbouring countries instead. He said this with reference to the German example where the German government recently announced it was allocating an impressive US\$6,7 billion to accommodate the 800 000 asylum seekers it is forecasting for 2015. Aid shortfalls mean that families will go hungry; that young children will be forced to leave school and take menial jobs; that young girls will be pressured into “early marriages,” and that spending on health and education will fall by the wayside. More Syrian refugees will, as a result of inadequate assistance in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and elsewhere, head for Europe.

Although the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development has stated that Europe will receive up to 1 million asylum applications for 2015 and that between 350 000 and 450 000 are likely to be granted refugee status, Martin Wolf argues the number of accepted asylum seekers would still amount to only 0,1 per cent of the EU's population. The numbers reaching the EU are also small relative to the total number of refugees. At the end of 2014 it had been reported that the number of forcibly displaced people in the world amounted to 59,9 million people.

At present, many countries within the Middle East have failed to take in any refugees. Amnesty International pointed out that “six Gulf countries – Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain – have offered zero resettlement places to Syrian refugees.” They have retaliated by stating that such a procedure would “threaten their safety”. At the same time the United Nations has reported since 2012 that Kuwait has provided nearly US\$1 billion in humanitarian aid to Syria and the main refugee-hosting countries.

Saudi Arabia (with US\$586 million), the United Arab Emirates (US\$405 million), and Qatar (US\$236 million) have likewise contributed.

Beyond security and humanitarian criticisms, a prominent complaint from the anti-immigration camp is that taking in refugees comes at a tremendous economic cost. According to them their countries already need to deal with joblessness, and refugees will take away jobs from the native population and create poverty.

Studies across a number of countries, however, show that when there is an influx of refugees into a population, it could produce long-term positive or neutral effects on the nation's economy, holds to *The Washington Post*. According to migration expert Hein de Haas, migration generally has a relatively small, rather than radical or negative effect, on economies.

Whether myths or facts, regarding the labour market in the EU, the migrant situation puts social pressure on migrants and it can pit European people against migrants. It has also been stated that those who are identified as economic migrants not entitled to international protection, will be returned to their home countries. European Commission vice president Frans Timmermans has warned of a “surge” in far-right extremism if Europe fails to tackle the migrant crisis adequately.

Germany's domestic intelligence chief, Hans-Georg Maassen, has warned of a radicalisation of right-wing groups amid a record influx of migrants and refugees, as xenophobic rallies and clashes shook several German towns late in September. “What we're seeing in connection with the refugee crisis is a mobilisation on the street of right-wing extremists, but also of some left-wing extremists” who oppose them.”

The challenge of refugees fleeing across Europe and elsewhere has no easy answer. Settling political turmoil in war-torn countries and rebuilding their economies and societies will require significant collaboration between national and the international communities. To what extent this situation can be dealt with in a humane fashion remains to be seen.

One thing is certain, the refugee crisis is a pressure cooker examining human values.



permanent settlement. It opened on 28 July 2012 to host fleeing Syrians. By 26 March 2015 the camp population was estimated at 83 000 refugees. Whereas the camp features market-like structures along the main street where goods like vegetables, basic household equipment and clothes can be purchased, a lack of sufficient food supplies and proper accommodation is in fact an urgent concern. The conditions as it stands has unfortunately seen an increasing number of reports on crime, including prostitution and drug-dealing.

While many are fleeing to Europe it is well established that most refugees would prefer to stay near their home countries in hopes of returning when conditions stabilise.

Neighbouring countries to Syria and Iraq, such as Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey have taken in an estimated 4,8 million refugees from these two countries and others. Of these refugees Turkey hosts at least 1,7 million,