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United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR)

# Research Report

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Topic 1: The distribution of refugees entering Europe through the Mediterranean



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## Introduction:

During recent years, an increase in the number of Displaced Persons from Africa have been travelling to Europe. This scale of the sudden increase has called for immediate solutions, as some refugee camps and countries have been unable to cope with the severity of the issue, and therefore have requested help from the international community to take upon its responsibilities and help lift the financial and humanitarian burden imposed by a large number of DP's arriving at once. This development have lead some countries to build countermeasures, which has closed favorable routes and forced many DP's to consider travelling across the Mediterranean sea in unsafe vessels on their way to Europe.

## Definition of key terms:

**Balkan-route:** A route from Syria to Europe travelling through relatively unhostile and arable land. The route crosses the borders of Turkey, Bulgaria, Serbia or Romania, Hungary or Croatia and Slovenia or Austria.

**Internally displaced person [IDP]:** A person who is forced to abandon his home or region but remains within his country of origin.

**Displaced person [DP]:** A person who is forced to abandon his home, region or country, often due to armed conflict or ethnic cleansing.

**Schengen area:** An area within the European Union where participating members do not exhibit border controls.

## Background information:

Following the unrest in the Middle East during the Arab Spring of 2011, an armed conflict broke out in the Syrian Arab Republic between the government military supporting President Bashar al-Assad and the opposition. Other notable armies acting in the region are the NATO coalition lead by the United States of America and the armed forces of the Russian Federation. The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant [ISIL] is also known to operate in the region. The conflict has caused an increase in the number of internally displaced persons [IDP's] as well as displaced persons [DP's] in the neighboring countries. As the refugee camps set up in the neighboring countries began to fill up, a steady stream of DP's headed for states further away seeking to gain legal status of a refugee as

defined under the United Nations 1951 Refugee Convention, thus securing livelihood in a safe country.

Another contributing factor to the stream of DP's is the armed rebellion in Nigeria. The rebellion began in 2009 with the armed organization Boko Haram as the key contributor of national unrest and violence. The conflict, originating from religious disputes, has since spread to the neighboring countries of Cameroon, Chad and Niger, therefore causing a large number of IDP's and DP's, whereas a part of the latter group has travelled northward to find secure livelihood. A conservative estimate by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre puts the number of IDP's close to 2,1 million people as of December 2015<sup>1</sup>, of which 1,9 million are still as of June 2017 internally displaced from their home<sup>2</sup> according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs.

Many of the aforementioned DP's travelled via the 'Balkan-route', as this crossed quickly into Schengen-territory and therefore made travelling deeply into Europe easier. In response to the increasing number of refugees travelling through the respective countries, Bulgaria erected a border fence in 2014 along the border of Turkey to limit the influx of what was considered to be illegal border crossings. In 2015, citing that the European Union was "too slow to act"<sup>3</sup>, Hungary also erected a border fence stretching 523 kilometers which was to be guarded by up to 900 soldiers. These countermeasures effectively closed the Balkan route, as they limited the border crossings to Hungary from approximately 100.000 in October of 2015 to 315 in November of 2015.



Alternative routes crossing the Mediterranean have since gained popularity, primarily by inflatable boats or rafts landing on the shore of Cyprus, Spain, Malta, Italy and Greece. Due to the lack of safety equipment, non-educated or non-existing maritime staffing and low overall quality of the vessels sailing across the Mediterranean from Africa or Turkey, these passages have often resulted in accidents and intensive rescue missions on the part of the respective European coast guards. Due to the large numbers of DP's attempting to cross the Mediterranean, many deaths as a result of accidents and drownings occur. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has confirmed

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.internal-displacement.org/sub-saharan-africa/nigeria/figures-analysis>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.unocha.org/nigeria/about-ocha-nigeria/about-crisis>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/hungary/11680840/Hungary-orders-100-mile-Serbia-border-fence-to-keep-out-migrants.html>

upwards of 15.500 deaths<sup>4</sup> from DP's attempting to cross the Mediterranean from 2014-2017. The three most common nationalities of Mediterranean sea arrivals to Europe since the outbreak in 2015 have been Nigerians, Afghans and Syrians, likely due to the previously mentioned conflicts. Since 2014, the UNHCR has accounted for over 1,7 million sea arrivals of DP's to Europe.

## Relevant Countries

**Spain:** Spain has received considerable amounts of DP's, but has however officially shown goodwill towards refugees. The amount of DP's has, however, by critics been cited as being too many, therefore hindering effective processing of asylum cases. Therefore, the Kingdom of Spain would be in favor of expanding the United Nations Resettlement Programme to spread out the number of asylum cases to other countries. The Kingdom of Spain would also likely oppose the construction of further border fences, as well as the currently constructed border fences in Hungary and Bulgaria, as it would consider these a danger to DP's travelling to Europe. The Kingdom of Spain would also likely argue in favor of a United Nations cooperative program with the goal of stopping the lucrative business of human trafficking across the Mediterranean, both by increasing the police cooperation, and by removing the economic incentives for this trafficking.

**Italy:** Due to the large amount of DP's Italy has received on its borders, it has threatened to shut its harbors from humanitarian ships that may be carrying DP's into Italy. Italy has received over 200.000 DP's, which it considers to be overwhelming. The Italian Republic would therefore be in favor of expanding the United Nations Resettlement Programme to spread out the number of asylum cases and DP's, and to decrease the amount of DP's travelling by sea to its borders. The Coast Guard of Italy has been a very active operator in the Mediterranean, carrying out numerous rescue missions. By expanding the Resettlement Programme, the Coast Guard would not have to carry out as many missions, and, in their opinion, unnecessary risk of life would be stopped. Italy would also likely argue in favor of a United Nations cooperative program with the goal of stopping the lucrative business of human trafficking across the Mediterranean, both by increasing the police cooperation, and by removing the economic incentives for this trafficking.

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<sup>4</sup> <http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean>

**Greece:** The economy of Greece has been struggling, and therefore many refugee camps in Greece have been criticized for their standard of living. Despite this, Greece has not publicly opposed the expenditure of refugees in their country, but would likely support an expansion of the United Nations Resettlement Programme, as this would lessen the economic burden of DP's residing in Greece.

## Relevant Organisations

**European Union:** The European Union has a great interest in solving the issue at hand, as it is causing internal political issues. The EU also has the financial and humanitarian capabilities of solving the issue in cooperation between the member states.

**Frontex:** Frontex is an agency under the EU, which is tasked with guarding the exterior borders of Europe, both on land and at sea. The agency provides surveillance and guarding, and has helped with immediate relief of the pressure invoked on countries affected by a big stream of DP's.

**UNHCR:** The UNHCR is the UN Organ tasked with dealing with the issue of refugees worldwide.

**The Red Cross:** The Red Cross is an NGO that aims to aid refugees in immediate need both in Europe, Africa and at sea. The Red Cross has even been noted for having a ship that picks up refugees involved in accidents at sea and sailing them to a safe harbor, often in Italy.

## Relevant UN Resolutions

Security Council Resolution 2240 (2015): Resolution 2240 deals with the issue of human trafficking across the Mediterranean and condemns the practice of this. It further reaffirms the need for all member nations to actively prevent this. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12072.doc.htm>

Security Council Resolution 2312 (2016): Further elaborates upon resolution 2240 (2015) and extends the authorization to intercept vessels suspected of illegal human trafficking.

<https://www.un.org/press/en/2016/sc12543.doc.htm>

A/71/L.1

Declaration for Refugees and Migrants adopted by the General Assembly in 2016. The declaration

aims to increase international cooperation and shared responsibility on the increasing number of DP's and IDP's, in order to resolve the issue. <https://undocs.org/A/71/L.1>

UNHCR 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Delegates should find themselves familiar with this convention, as it has information regarding the legal status of refugees and their individual rights. <http://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>

## Possible Solutions

Since the issue at hand is predominantly caused by the aforementioned regional conflicts, a comprehensive aid mission to these countries would help lessen the burden on the Mediterranean routes. The chair wishes for the debate to revolve around solving the issue locally in Europe and Northern Africa, where countries could suggest an expansion to the United Nations Resettlement Program, or request for an entirely new human aid mission to be established with a more specific goal and process. Countries bordering the Mediterranean may also wish to suggest UN involvement in sea rescue operations, as these can be very costly and difficult, where an international collaboration could result in sharing of knowledge and the economic burden.

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