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# Europe's Refugee Crisis

## Is There a Forefront Solution?

Dr Sheetal Sharma

Europe has always been a continent of migration, attracting people from all parts of the world, but at present, the inward migration has taken a different course. Europe is facing a crisis, neither financial nor political, but humanitarian. It's a historic moment, in the recent history of Europe. For the last few months, thousands of refugees saving their lives and salvaging their precious belongings are seeking asylum in Europe, with the basic quest to be just 'be alive'. Thousands of people entering Europe are not the economic and legal migrants; they are refugees, who are fleeing conflict ridden Syria, which is facing the worst kind of civil war and power struggle between various factions – the ISIS and the government.

Every day countless people, risking their lives, are making an arduous journey by rail, road or sea to reach Greece, Hungary, or Italy and then move on to their dream destination – Germany or Sweden – or settle elsewhere where they can lead a decent life away from the fear of death. But, the journey that they are taking in order to reach Europe is a death trap in itself.

Hundreds of people have drowned in overloaded and dingy boats or rafts while attempting to reach Europe through sea routes. Approximately five thousand people have been killed so far while making this perilous journey, including children, women and old people. Human traffickers and smugglers are having a field day in the turmoil as they charge thousands of euros per individual to help them enter the European borders. Operating at various places either in tandem or as rival groups, the smugglers are running a parallel shadow economy and making millions out of the plight of affected people.

Mainly coming from countries of the Middle East, Syria, Iraq and North Africa, like Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, or Afghanistan and even Pakistan; these people are escaping either war or poverty prevailing in their countries. According to UNHRC statistics, there were 59.5 million persons who had been displaced because of

war, conflict or persecution by the end of 2014. Europe alone in the year 2014 received 626,000 asylum applications.

The number of people seeking refuge in Europe has risen significantly. It is not for the first time that Europe has seen such a big number of people seeking asylum. As per the estimates, during the Yugoslav Wars, there were approximately 700,000 asylum applicants from conflict ridden Yugoslavia. Since

then the bigger member states of the European Union have been receiving and processing shelter applications of people from different parts of the world, and the neighbouring countries. But this year, the influx of refugees has been sudden and beyond manageable proportions.

By the end of July this year, nearly 450,000 people have filed applications for asylum in Europe. In the first half of 2015 - 185,000 people claimed asylum



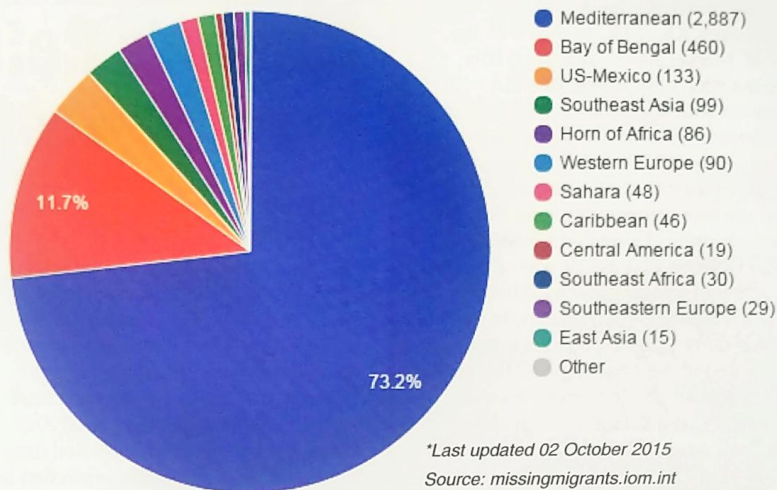


in Europe, almost 90 percent more than the previous year. The UNHRC's 'Global Trends Report: World at War' warned that the migrant crisis, or the percentage of displaced people due to war is going out of hand and will soon explode.

And the warning turned out to be true. Approximately 4.5 million people have been displaced due to war in Syria alone. The war in Syria began in 2011, and so far 250,000 people have been killed in the conflict, and millions of civilians are facing constant threat of death due to the unrest. It is estimated that 95 percent of the displaced people, i.e. 4.3 million refugees from Syria have got shelter in Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, and Egypt.

In spite of the fact that Jordan is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, the Government refers to Syrians as refugees. By the end of last year, only the number of 'Population

### Migrant deaths by region, 2015



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of Concern' stood at 672,930 in Jordan which includes refugees, asylum seekers, Internally Displaced People, Stateless Persons, Returned refugees and Returned IDPs.

Despite its own fragile economic and social structure, the Government of Jordan has granted Syrian refugees access to health and education services and ensured their security. It's also reported that due to the domestic socio-economic and political conditions of these countries and lack of preparedness to accept refugees many of the refugee camps have now become over-crowded and undersupplied. Nevertheless, as compared to the response of the Arab world their efforts to accommodate displaced people have been appreciated the world over.

Seen as an economically prosperous and peaceful continent, Europe attracts people who are seeking better and healthy lifestyle. When it becomes the issue of life and death in war torn countries such as Syria and some countries in North Africa, escaping to Europe happens to

become all the more obvious choice as Germany declared that it will take more than 800,000 people who are willing to come. In the first half of 2015, Germany reportedly received over 200,000 applications for asylum.

It was predicted in August that 800,000 people would arrive in the country as refugees or to pursue asylum by the end of the year, up from an estimate of 300,000 in January. According to Mohammed A. El-Erian, "The scale of the challenge that Europe is facing is immense with the flow of refugees extremely difficult to monitor and channel, let alone limit. It seems that the phenomenon will continue as long as instability and chaos persists in these countries of origin, such as Syria, Iraq and Libya. On the other hand the transport networks present in Europe are under stress, as are shelters, border crossings, and registration centers. Common asylum policies as established by the Dublin regulation i.e. the fundamental rule that asylum-seekers should be registered at their point of entry into the EU – are not functioning or are being bypassed. In view of the large influx, the transit countries erected barriers on their borders to stop relentless flow of refugees and ban their entry in their country. Suddenly one of the cherished concepts of uninterrupted travel within the border-free Schengen Area is under threat." However amid rising international pressure on the one hand and humanitarian calling on the other the German Chancellor Angela Merkel exhibited political courage and moral leadership.

The German Chancellor Merkel pronounced the language of shared





values and European ideals and said the continent as a whole had to deal with the problem. Merkel stated "if Europe fails on the question of refugees, its close connection with universal civil rights will be destroyed." She declared that Germany can take up to 800,000 refugees this year and then thousands of asylum-seekers flowed towards Germany by road, rail, bus, on foot, chanting "Germany! Germany".

The German Chancellor was severely criticized by German papers for her late and tepid response when a far-right and neo-Nazi demonstration against a refugee camp turned violent on August 21. It was commented that she took some time to demonstrate the political courage and moral leadership. The Economist reported "for too long Europe has closed its eyes to Syria's foul and bloody civil war, and tried to keep the suffering multitudes out. Suddenly, the continent's gates have been pushed open by two political forces. One is moral conscience, belatedly awakened by the image of a drowned Syrian child on a Turkish beach. The other is the political courage of Angela Merkel, the German chancellor, who told her people to set aside their fear of immigrants and show compassion to the needy".

These refugees were welcomed by the cheering Germans as they alighted from the vehicles or reached the camps. Volunteers, women and children gave drinks, food and stuffed toys to children and elders, strained, exhausted, and tired by the journey.

The political leadership, moral courage, and responsibility that Germany exhibited up till now has been strikingly different. But the response of some of the governments within the European Union has also not been very encouraging. Although all of them acknowledge the fact that the human cost of refugee crisis has been massive and all agree that they need to do more, there is an inherent fear of the consequences of housing the refugees. Some politicians fear that the rising number of refugees will burden the already crumbling social security structure and further impose or add-on weight upon local communities and taxpayers.

The presence of legal economic migrants itself, in a large number of cases, is seen as a burden on the social security net that governments in Europe offer to their citizens. The entry of refugees will further strain the system. But it is equally important to identify the fact that in the case of Syrian refugees, a large number of people are educated and skilled. They are professionals and

## Europe's Refugee Crisis *Reasons behind Calamity*

Ashish Pandey

Europe's refugee crisis is creating newspaper headlines the world over. Not only this immigrant catastrophe acting as catalysis to short term economic commotion but also fuelling long term humanitarian disaster at the same time.

During the second quarter of 2015 (from April to June), 213,200 first time asylum seekers applied for protection in the European Union (EU), up by 15 percent compared with the first quarter of 2015 and by 85 percent compared with the second quarter of 2014. In particular, the number of Syrians and Afghans soared significantly to reach almost 44,000 and 27,000 respectively (eurostat newsrelease 163/2015).

Although assimilation of the refugees in the mainstream economy may stand as a major challenge for European countries such as Germany in the short run, the immigration may actually turn up as a positive phenomenon in the long run if accomplished systematically, as per most of the economists worldwide.

It's an open secret that the ratio of workers to those of economically inactive is gradually declining over time. With the heavy influx of refugees the existing demographic trend is certain to alter. Members of the Eastern Europe such as Poland and Hungary are the most prone to such demographic changes considering their ageing society.

Talking about Germany in particular, the inflow of refugees will boost the country's economy by 0.25 percent next year alone on account of increased spending on public services by the government (DIW, Berlin based think-tank). In addition, this will help in fulfilling the gap left by retirees from the workforce. As per latest estimates, the German labour force will reduce by 6 million by 2030.

What are the foremost reasons behind the sudden upsurge in the number of refugees to Europe in the past several months? The following is an intricate mix:



Refugees sneaking into European borders through barbed wires

will get absorbed in the workforce easily. There is no doubt that Europe is facing a demographic deficit, the population is aging and Europe needs more people, either economic migrants or refugees-for the sake of the world, itself and running the economy.

In such circumstances, the educated and skilled refugees will soon become part of the work force and in fact pay back whatever they are supposed to extract from the social security coffers. The OECD Reports show that migrant populations, if managed well, can lead to



**Syrian War:** For the past four years, Syria is burning into flames of never-ending war. As per rough estimates, about 250,000 people have died. It is the prime cause behind Syrians running towards safe pastures. The number has only doubled in comparison to last year. People are fleeing conflict in countries such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Eritrea, and Somalia.

**Distance:** The route to Europe is far shorter and easier. Till last year, the majority of refugees chose the sea route from Libya to Italy, but now the Turkey to Greece route has replaced the preference. Turkey that stands next-door attracts most immigrants from Syria. Even migrants from Iraq and Afghanistan find it much closer in distance. The crossing space is just about one hour and twenty minutes from Greece to Turkey to creep through the borders of the Balkan countries.

**Germany's Welcome to Immigrants:** In the latest, German Chancellor Angela Merkel extended temporary nationality to all refugees. Even the positive TV coverage showing Germans welcoming the immigrants has sent affirmative communication across the residents of war-torn countries. However, the situation may drastically change now after the new border controls were introduced by Germany, Hungary, Austria and Slovakia recently.

**Syria's Forced Conscription Drive:** Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government has been working since 2014 to enrol reservists to serve in the army in order to scrap the rebellion against his rule. Most of the people fleeing Syria claim they want to flee forced conscription.

**Europe provides better Living Conditions:** So far 4 million Syrians have already fled to countries such as Turkey and Jordan. Presently, a large section of children is not going to school. So, they are heading towards Europe citing education of their children along with the prospect of building fresh lives as the main reasons. ■

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the economic growth and innovation in the host country.

Yet another fear that grips many of the countries of Europe is that the majority of the refugees are Muslims, and this will alter the religious and ethnic composition of population in otherwise



*Photo of drowned Syrian child Aylan who was washed up on a Turkish beach*

**A large number of people say that by opening borders and welcoming everyone there is a fear and threat that extremists masquerading as genuine refugees might enter thus putting the security of the entire continent at risk**

largely Christian Europe. Muslims constitute approximately 7 percent of the total population of the European Union, which is estimated to be 508 million in the beginning of 2015. It is interesting to note that even if Europe accepts all 4 million refugees from Syria and all happen to be Muslims, the total percentage of Muslims in the entire population will rise only marginally. Furthermore, the fear that Muslims have a higher birth rate and eventually the native population will be taken over by Muslims also is unfounded as the theory of demographic transition and social development states that whenever there is a rise in the standard of living and education, the rate of fertility goes down. The birth rate which was 2.4 percent among Muslims in Europe during 1990s is predicted to come down to 1.7 percent by 2030.

In the light of the reports regarding failure of multiculturalism in Europe in the past couple of years, the rise in Muslim

population can be a challenge for European governments. Life and everyday interaction with the 'cultural other' can lead to conflict and friction. As such there have been issues revolving around cultural practices and traditions followed by Muslims, such as hijab, burqa, halal meat, pork, height of minarets, and madrassas etc.

A large number of people say that by opening borders and welcoming everyone there is a fear and threat that extremists masquerading as genuine refugees might enter thus putting the security of the entire continent at risk. Given the borderless travel in Schengen zone, the whole continent becomes vulnerable to security threats posed by extremists who plan to carry out attacks on the western world. No wonder common people are worried and silently remain hesitant to the idea of welcoming refugees primarily belonging to other religious category. Some of the east European countries such as Poland, Slovenia, Serbia have been quite vocal about acceptance of only 'Christian refugees' and that too a small number of them. The very idea of accepting even a couple of hundred refugees as determined by the quota has sparked protest in many countries carried out by right-wing parties and protestors, such as Estonia.

As the influx continues to grow, the member states of the EU stand divided. Polarisation and disagreement are not new to the functional dynamics of the EU, but the EU has always emerged successfully out of the situations that seem like an impasse. Although the member states initially rejected the quota and plan to share the burden, despite the vehement opposition of some of the east European





Germany has committed an additional 100 million euros (\$113 million) to UN agencies to help refugees in their home regions

member states, EU adopted a plan to relocate 12 million migrants.

But there are some challenges that Europe faces now. The foremost is that of arranging for logistics for these people, which include shelter, food, health and education. Over a period of time proper arrangements must be made or the situation may become difficult to handle. The action and moral responsibility on the part of Europe alone is not sufficient to address the issue. The global community also needs to come forward and extend support to the Europeans in its effort to rehabilitate refugees. According to Sutherland, a large number of measures such as "special economic zones could be established in frontline countries to attract investment and create jobs for refugees, with the G-20 offering preferential trade status. Tax breaks and other support could be given to companies offering opportunities to refugees".

A large number of initiatives taken up by civil society and entrepreneurs are worth mentioning, such as Chris and Regina Catrambone, who created the Migrant Offshore Aid Station to rescue people at sea; the founders of Refugees Welcome, the Airbnb-type platform to match asylum seekers with families willing to host them; and Refugee Air, a pioneering Swedish effort to enable qualified asylum-seekers to fly to Europe. The Ikea Foundation is a major partner of the UN refugee agency in providing shelter to refugees. And Turkish-American Hamdi Ulukaya, founder of Chobani yogurt, has pledged \$700 million to support refugees. Such efforts need to be co-ordinated and supported.

The second challenge is to begin the process of socio-economic integration of refugees into society. The educated and

### Even if one settles the economic and social life of a refugee, the psychological scars are not so easy to erase and the traumatic experience may result in violent behavioural dispositions

skilled refugees will find jobs easily. The others who have lower levels of education may in the long run become burden on the system and source of tension in society. Integrating people from a different religious, ethnic and cultural background always remains a challenge and when it is about integration of people who have gone through the trauma and experience of exodus it indeed becomes very challenging.

Even if one settles the economic and social life of a refugee, the psychological scars are not so easy to erase and the traumatic experience may result in violent behavioural dispositions. Time, effort,

and patience are necessary on the part of host societies and refugees to strike a balance between the two cultures and integrate refugees into the mainstream culture. The native population, despite its expressed empathy also is sceptical about the successful integration and assimilation of refugees. At this juncture the issue of cultural conflict is not discussed openly as it gets subsumed under the call of moral duty and responsibility. One can only hope that once the refugees settle economically and come to terms with normal everyday life, their integration and experience with European values and cultures will remain harmonious.

There is a need for concerted and co-ordinated effort at the global level to address the political turmoil in Syria and similar situations in the remaining affected regions. The global action must go beyond the immediate offers of temporary shelters or permanent residences, funding or charity.

One should not forget the real issue behind the game of numbers, i.e. how many have come? The moot question is 'who' and 'why' are they coming? What will be the outcome of this influx, how will society and economy respond to the influx, and how to integrate them in the future? The world community needs to address the fundamental issues causing conflict and war in the region. The leaders must convey to public that they need to rise to the demands of the occasion and exhibit the strength of human values. ■

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