



SUPPORTING AND
EMPOWERING
REFUGEES



JOINT BRIEFING: A protection-based response to the crisis in the Mediterranean

“Triton cannot be a search-and-rescue operation. I mean, in our operational plan, we cannot have provisions for proactive search-and-rescue action. This is not in Frontex’s mandate.” Head of Frontex, Fabrice Leggeri, on the eve of the summit, April 2015

We call on Britain’s leaders:

- To urgently press for the immediate resumption of search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean and to show leadership within the EU by ensuring that saving lives is front and centre of the response to the crisis and no one is returned before having the opportunity to claim asylum.
- In the short to medium term, to create safe and legal routes for refugees to access protection in the UK including by resettling significantly more refugees from around the world and by making it easier for refugees to reunite with their relatives in the UK.
- In the longer term, to tackle the root causes of refugee flight and encourage other countries around the world to sign and respect the UN Refugee Convention.

The world is in the grip of the worst refugee crisis since World War II. Because of a lack of safe and legal routes, many refugees are forced to put their lives in the hands of smugglers or risk perilous journeys, in their search for safety. Some are trying to cross the Mediterranean.

Currently, the UK Government response is largely focused on tackling smugglers, often wrongly labelled as traffickers. This completely ignores the underlying reason why men, women and children are forced to take dangerous journeys in the first place: Europe’s hostile immigration policies leave them with no other choice.

The border to the EU is becoming the most dangerous border in the world. It risks becoming more deadly by proposed plans to use military force rather than focusing on saving lives. We think there is an alternative.

Key recommendations

There is no single solution to a crisis of this scale. However, there are a series of actions which the UK Government could take in the short, medium and long term, which would save lives.

As a matter of urgency

Support the immediate resumption of search and rescue operations. The end of Mare Nostrum has not led to a decrease in the number of people seeking to cross the Mediterranean, and can reasonably be linked to an increase in the number of deaths at sea. According to Amnesty International, “in the first three and half months of 2015 as many as 900 people died or went missing at sea, compared with 17 over the same period in 2014. That is one person drowning for every 23 attempting the crossing or 53 times more deaths than in the same period in 2014, even if the total number of people crossing remained broadly the same.”¹

The UK Government must recognise that the presence of such an operation is not a ‘pull factor’, but is instead an essential way of saving the lives of some of the world’s most vulnerable people. It must urgently call for the re-establishment of a fully funded robust search and rescue operation in the Mediterranean, at least on the same scale as Mare Nostrum.

¹ See http://www.amnesty.org.uk/sites/default/files/sarbriefingpdf_1.pdf (page 13)

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Show leadership within the EU by ensuring that saving lives is front and centre of the response to the crisis and that no one is returned before having the opportunity to claim asylum in a country that has signed the UN Refugee Convention. Evidence suggests that many of those making the journey are likely to be refugees. Indeed, last year the Home Office granted refugee status to 86% of all asylum seekers from Eritrea and Syria, two of the largest groups crossing the Mediterranean.² It is impossible to see how returning people to these countries would not constitute a contravention of the UN Refugee Convention, which prohibits non-refoulement.

The UK and other countries should also show solidarity with those receiving most of the new arrivals by assisting with reception and ensuring a more equitable distribution across the EU to provide protection and humanitarian support to those in need.

In the short to medium term: Create safe and legal routes for refugees to access protection in the UK.

Ways this can be done include:

Resettling significantly more refugees from around the world in response to the current crisis. The UNHCR has identified around 960,000 refugees in need of resettlement worldwide, yet the UK resettles only 750 refugees a year through the Gateway Protection Programme and has only resettled 143 refugees from Syria since the start of the conflict. The UK's resettlement programmes should be offering thousands not hundreds of places to refugees around the world. For example, aid agencies working in the region suggest the UK should be resettling 10,000 Syrian refugees by the end of 2015. In addition to resettlement programmes, other safe and legal routes should be explored such as humanitarian or asylum visas.

Making it easier for refugees to reunite with their relatives in the UK. Very few refugees with relatives in the UK would qualify for family reunion under existing regulations. Currently, only those with relatives who have been recognised as refugees are entitled to bring their families to the UK. Except in exceptional circumstances, this would only apply to spouses and children under the age of 18. In practice, this is interpreted very rigidly and it is extremely difficult to join family if you are not a spouse or a dependant child.

British citizens, or legally residing Syrians who have not claimed asylum, with family in Syria, are not eligible to bring them to safety in the UK without a fee and strict conditions which in practice are prohibitive. The rules should be more flexible for those whose family members are obviously in danger.

In the longer term

Tackle root causes and encourage other countries around the world to sign and respect the 1951 Refugee Convention. As many world leaders have stated, the time to tackle the root causes of refugee flight has never been more apparent. We also call upon UK leaders to encourage as many countries around the world as possible to sign and respect the UN 1951 Refugee Convention and 1967 Protocol to ensure that refugees worldwide are able to find a safety.

Key facts

- More than 43% of those who travelled across the Mediterranean in 2014 were prima facie refugees.
- The numbers crossing the Mediterranean may seem high but 86% of the world's refugees live in the developing world.
- The UK is home to less than 1% of the world's refugees, significantly less than many of our EU neighbours.
- In 2014 Germany received six times the number of asylum applications than the UK, Sweden received three times the number and Italy and France received double.³
- Since 2011, the UK has received just 6,000 asylum applications from Syrians, and has resettled only 143 Syrian refugees, according to latest public statistics. In 2014 *alone*, Germany committed to resettling 20,000 Syrian refugees and received 40,000 asylum applications from Syrians.⁴

² According to Frontex, Syrians and Eritreans accounted for 46 per cent of the over 170,000 people who reached Italy by boat in 2014. See http://www.amnesty.org.uk/sites/default/files/sarbriefingpdf_1.pdf (page 7)

³ UK received 31,000, Italy received 56,000, France received 63,000, Sweden received 81,000 and Germany received 166,000. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/immigration-statistics-october-to-december-2014/immigration-statistics-october-to-december-2014>

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⁴ See <http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/documents/4168041/6742650/KS-QA-15-003-EN-N.pdf/b7786ec9-1ad6-4720-8a1d-430fcfc55018>

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