World Refugee Day 2014 – highest levels of displacement since World War II

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On World Refugee Day, celebrated on 20 June each year, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports on global displacement trends based on data collected from the previous calendar year by governments, Non-Government Organisation (NGO) partners and the UNHCR itself.

This year, in its publication *Global trends 2013*, the UNHCR has reported that the number of refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people worldwide has exceeded 50 million people for the first time since World War II.

The report notes that 51.2 million people were forcibly displaced by the end of 2013—6 million more than the 45.2 million reported in 2012. There were 16.7 million refugees worldwide and a record number of internally displaced people, 33.3 million, accounting for the largest increase of any group in the *Global trends 2013* report. An additional 1.1 million asylum seekers submitted applications for asylum in 2013.

The significant increases are mostly being driven by the Syrian conflict, with 2.5 million refugees and 6.5 million internally displaced people from there. However the world is also experiencing major new levels of displacement in Africa and elsewhere. The biggest refugee populations under UNHCR care were Afghans, Syrians and Somalis—together accounting for more than half of all global refugees. The countries hosting the largest number of refugees were Pakistan, Iran and Lebanon, and the Asia-Pacific region had the largest refugee population overall—3.5 million people.

This crisis has been building over the past year or so with the UNHCR warning of unusually high levels of displacement in 2012, when the UNHCR reported the highest numbers of refugees and internally displaced people on record since 1994. By December 2013, the UNHCR was reporting the highest levels ever seen by the agency. In March 2014, when the
UNHCR released its annual *Asylum trends 2013* publication, the agency also noted a sharp rise in asylum applications globally. In fact, asylum claims lodged in the 44 industrialized countries included in the report were at the second highest level in two decades. While the number of people of concern to the UNHCR continues to grow significantly, the magnitude and complexity of the issues arising from global asylum flows pose huge challenges for all of the world’s destination countries, not just Australia. In response, most States increasingly resort to more restrictive border control policies and harsh disruption measures to try and control irregular migratory movements.

However, the UNHCR and other stakeholders question the effectiveness of such deterrence policies, arguing that many desperate asylum seekers are unlikely to be deterred by what may be perceived to be the lesser evil. In the long-term, greater cooperation on a burden-sharing basis by destination countries is seen by the UNHCR to be a key component in order to more effectively attend to the protection needs of asylum seekers and refugees. On launching *Global trends 2013*, UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres stated that the ‘international community has to overcome its differences and find solutions to the conflicts of today in South Sudan, Syria, Central African Republic and elsewhere. Non-traditional donors need to step up alongside traditional donors’.

In our region in March 2013, the Government of Indonesia and the UNHCR hosted a *Regional roundtable on irregular movements by sea in the Asia-Pacific region*. Members of the Bali Process on People Smuggling, Trafficking in Persons and Related Transnational Crime (Bali Process) attended, including representatives from Australia. The meeting highlighted the need for greater regional government cooperation to address the complex issues arising from increasing levels of irregular migration in the Asia-Pacific region. Delegates acknowledged that irregular movement was a challenge for all governments, but pledged to pursue a ‘protection-sensitive’ approach when developing regional cooperation on these matters. Given that the Asia-Pacific region is currently hosting the largest refugee population overall of 3.5 million people, progressing these commitments is well overdue.