A very big year: asylum claims in industrialised countries reach a new high in 2014

Posted 31/03/2015 by Harriet Spinks

Data released by the office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) show that 2014 was a big year for asylum seeking, with asylum claims reaching the highest level in over two decades. The UNHCR report *Asylum trends 2014: levels and trends in industrialised countries*, released on 26 March 2015, provides data on asylum claims lodged in 44 industrialized countries (38 European countries plus the USA, Canada, Japan, South Korea, New Zealand and Australia). It reveals some significant trends in asylum claims around the world, including that 2014 saw a striking 45 per cent increase from the previous year in the number of asylum claims lodged. This is the fourth consecutive annual increase, and the second highest level since the early 1980s. The 2014 figure, of 866,000 asylum applications, is just short of the 900,000 lodged in 1992, which remains the highest on record.

The sharp increase in asylum claims in 2014 was largely driven by the ongoing conflict in Syria, which remained the number one country of origin for asylum seekers in 2014, having displaced Afghanistan from this position in 2013. The asylum trends data show how quickly the Syrian crisis has escalated: in 2014 there were 149,600 claims for asylum by people from Syria, which is more than double the number in 2013 (56,300) and a massive 17 times the number in 2011 (8,700). The 2014 figure is the highest number recorded by a single national group since 1992 (when 223,000 claims were lodged by people from Serbia and Montenegro). Syrians sought refuge in all 44 industrialised countries in 2014, but the numbers were highest in Germany (39,300) and Sweden (30,300).

Asylum claims from Iraqis also almost doubled in 2014 (68,700 in 2014 compared to 37,300 in 2013), making it the second largest source country for asylum seekers. Afghanistan was the third largest source country, with 59,500 claims in 2014 compared to 23,400 in 2013 (a 65 per cent increase).

Of the 44 countries included in the report, 30 experienced an increase in asylum claims. For many, this increase was substantial—Italy received nearly one and a half times the number of claims in 2014 (63,660) compared to 2013, with a 148 per cent increase. Turkey’s numbers...
almost doubled with a 96 per cent increase (87,820 claims in 2014). Large increases were also experienced outside Europe with the USA recording a 44 per cent increase (121,160 claims in 2014), Canada a 30 per cent increase (13,450 claims in 2014) and Japan, which traditionally receives very few asylum applications, a 53 per cent increase (5,000 claims in 2014). The countries receiving the largest overall numbers of asylum claims in 2014 were Germany (173,070), the US (121,160) and Turkey (87,820).

While asylum claims increased significantly across industrialised countries, and for most individual countries, Australia was one of a handful of countries which resisted this trend. Asylum claims in Australia in 2014 (8,960) were down 24 per cent compared to 2013 (11,740). The fact that asylum claims have increased so significantly around the world indicates that the decline in asylum seekers coming to Australia does not reflect fewer people seeking protection. Rather, it reflects the reduction in irregular maritime arrivals to Australia in 2013 following the introduction of the Coalition’s border protection policies which have prevented people from arriving in Australia. People are continuing to claim asylum, (the report demonstrates that they are doing so in almost unprecedented numbers) they are simply claiming elsewhere.

While Australia has not received large numbers of asylum claims from Syrians, it has received large numbers from Afghanistan, which was the second largest source country for asylum claims in industrialised countries in 2014—claims from Afghans increased across industrialised countries by 65 per cent between 2013 and 2014, while in Australia they declined by 95 per cent. Australia has also received large numbers of asylum seekers from Sri Lanka. Asylum claims from Sri Lanka declined by 12 per cent across industrialised countries between 2013 and 2014, but Australia experienced a much larger decline, with claims from this group also down 95 per cent. (Data for asylum claims in Australia by nationality in 2013 and 2014 can be found in the Excel spreadsheets accompanying the UNHCR report.)

It is important to note that the UNHCR’s asylum trends data is for industrialised countries only, and represents the tip of the iceberg in terms of the numbers of asylum seekers and refugees worldwide. UNHCR figures show that in 2013 there were some 51.2 million forcibly displaced persons worldwide, including 16.7 million refugees and 1.2 million asylum seekers. Most do not make their way to industrialised countries to seek protection. In fact the vast majority of asylum seekers and refugees are hosted in developing countries, usually in close proximity to the conflict zones. It is neighbouring countries, for example, that are most affected by the exodus from Syria, with Lebanon currently hosting almost 2 million Syrian refugees, Turkey hosting around 1.7 million and Jordan around 600 000. In comparison, the contribution by industrialised countries is small—and Australia’s contribution is just a fraction of this.