Highest levels of global forced displacement on record—World Refugee Day 20 June 2015

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On World Refugee Day—celebrated on 20 June every year—the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reports on global displacement trends using data collected over the previous calendar year. This time last year the UNHCR reported that the number of refugees, asylum-seekers and internally displaced people worldwide had exceeded 50 million people for the first time since World War II. This year, in its publication *Global Trends 2014*, the UNHCR is reporting the highest levels of displacement on record—59.5 million people (19.5 million refugees, 38.2 million internally displaced people and 1.8 million asylum seekers).

Over half of the world's refugees are children and 53 per cent of refugees worldwide originate from just three countries—Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia. Largely due to the conflict in Syria, Turkey became the largest refugee-hosting country in the world for the first time, followed by Pakistan, Lebanon, Iran, Ethiopia and Jordan. One quarter of the world’s refugees (most originating from Afghanistan) reside in countries covered by the UNHCR’s Asia Pacific region.

In response to this crisis, many destination countries are resorting to tougher deterrence measures in an attempt to stem the rise in asylum and refugee flows. In a strongly worded statement, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, António Guterres, criticised this approach:

Yet, even as this tragedy unfolds, some of the countries most able to help are shutting their gates to people seeking asylum. Borders are closing, pushbacks are increasing, and hostility is rising. Avenues for legitimate escape are fading away. And humanitarian organizations like mine run on shoestring budgets, unable to meet the spiraling needs of such a massive population of victims. We have reached a moment of truth. World stability is falling apart leaving a wake of displacement on an unprecedented scale. Global powers have become either passive observers or distant players in the conflicts driving so many innocent civilians from their homes.
Some experts have questioned the effectiveness of deterrence measures, arguing that desperate asylum seekers are unlikely to be deterred by them. Instead, many of those fleeing persecution and conflict are prepared to take enormous risks, including embarking on dangerous maritime journeys. At the end of 2014 the UNHCR estimated that at least 348,000 people had risked boat crossings globally throughout the year. Since then, the UNHCR estimates that there have been at least 100,000 crossings over the Mediterranean alone.

In our region approximately 54,000 people (predominately Rohingya Muslims originating from Myanmar) embarked on boat journeys in 2014. However, the vast majority (53,000) sought refuge in Thailand and Malaysia—only a handful attempted to reach Australia. Already in the first quarter of 2015, 25,000 were estimated to have departed on such journeys in the Bay of Bengal where criminal activity is particularly rife—double the departure rate of the same time last year. UNHCR interviews document harrowing tales from survivors of starvation, drownings, illness and human rights abuses, including instances of trafficking and sexual violence.

In the long-term, greater cooperation on a burden-sharing basis by destination countries is seen by many stakeholders and the UNHCR to be the only way to effectively attend to the protection needs of the world’s displaced people.

Many destination countries across the world acknowledge the need for greater regional cooperation to address the complex issues arising from increasing levels of irregular migration and over recent years there have been several initiatives at the international level with mixed results. For example, in April 2015, the European Commission presented a 10 point plan, proposing immediate actions that could be taken in response to the crisis situation in the Mediterranean. However, commentators were quick to question the likely effectiveness of this initiative on the grounds that the plan does not analyse or address the ‘push factors’ or root causes of the irregular migration flows. In our region, seventeen countries and three international organisations, including the UNHCR, met in Bangkok in May 2015 to discuss the rise in boat arrivals (driven largely by Rohingya asylum seekers fleeing persecution), but according to media reports, very little progress was actually made.

A recent Amnesty International report, The global refugee crisis: a conspiracy of neglect, states that the situation in the Asia Pacific region and elsewhere is at crisis point and calls for a summit of world leaders to consider collectively committing to a number of initiatives, including the resettlement of the one million refugees in immediate need of protection and the establishment of a global refugee fund to respond to humanitarian crises as they arise. More broadly, the UNHCR’s António Guterres has argued for greater international cooperation to manage the global crisis of forced displacement:
...the world must either shoulder collectively the burden of helping the victims of war, or risk standing by as less wealthy countries and communities—which host 86 per cent of the world's refugees—become overwhelmed and unstable.