Making Sense Of The Worst Refugee Crisis Since World War II

Leaving one's home country is never an easy decision. But it is especially hard when the journey is fraught with danger and uncertainty and there is no guaranty of a successful outcome. Yet, unbearable conflict or repression forces thousands of people to take the plunge each year. However, over the past two years, the number of refugees has escalated to alarming levels and there appears to be no end in sight.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), by the end of 2014, there were 19.5 million people living as refugees, almost 3 million more than in 2013. The humanitarian agency stated that last year, conflict and persecution displaced over 42,000 people daily! Some moved to "safer" zones within the country in hopes of coming back when things improved. Others gave up on their homeland and left to seek refuge in neighboring nations.
While leaving the country may sound like a great way to start a new life, it is not. That's because refugees are not instantly allowed to become citizens of the country they are seeking asylum in. Instead, they have to register with the United Nations and apply for a new home, a process that could take up to 24 months and sometimes even longer. Meanwhile, they spend their days in tented camps that are often crowded and offer little in the form of amenities. There are also no schools for kids. It is only when receive an invite from a third country, that they can settle down and start a new life.

But despite knowing the odds, millions of people are opting to become refugees. The numbers are so large that they are being compared to the situation at the end of World War II, when between seven and nine million Germans fled or were expelled from eastern Europe. So what is causing this latest displacement? Read on . . .

The biggest and most pressing refugee crisis involves the residents of Syria who are leaving the country in unprecedented numbers. The issue can be traced back to the series of revolutions that began in Tunisia and then spread to other nations in North Africa and the Middle East. While some of the leaders gave in to the demands for change and resigned, Syria's Bashar al-Assad's was not as accommodating. As a result, Syria has been embroiled in a bitter civil war since then. If that is not bad enough, the residents also have to suffer through the daily atrocities imposed by ISIS members.

It is no wonder that the fear and chaos has caused 12 million Syrians to leave their homes since 2011. Of these 7.6 million have been internally displaced and remain in the country, while 4 million, (one in every five Syrian) have fled to neighboring areas and are currently living as refugees.
Of these, about 2 million are living in camps outside Turkey. Another million have sought refuge in neighboring Lebanon, and about 629,000 are living in makeshift homes in Jordan. Though the three countries were initially sympathetic, their resources are now being stretched thin. As a result, they have tightened their borders, forcing fleeing Syrians to make the treacherous journey across the Mediterranean to Europe.

In 2014, about 219,000 people crossed over to seek asylum in Europe. In just eight months of 2015, the number has increased to over 300,000, and there is no end in sight. What’s even more disheartening is that 51% of the refugees are under the age of 18, and 39% are under the age of 11.
To make matters worse, Syrians are not the only ones seeking refuge. Political and other conflicts are causing people to leave Iraq, Eritrea, Southern Sudan, and Afghanistan in record numbers.

Meanwhile, European countries are trying to come up with a solution to handle the increasingly worrisome refugee situation. On September 7th, Germany's Angela Merkel announced that the country would open its borders to all asylum seekers and urged other European nations to do the same. However, the Chancellor was forced to retract her promise and close its boundaries within a week. While the alleged reason is a shortage of beds in the refugee reception centers, many believe the Chancellor and her team were spooked by the large number of refugees that rushed in.

On September 14th, the 28 European Union officials held an emergency meeting to come up a feasible solution. However, it was not very productive. Though the members agreed to settle 160,000 refugees, they could not reach a decision on how many each country would be responsible for. Though it may sound callous not to help another human in need, the officials have to be careful. That's because they have to find a balance between the humanitarian urge and the cost and impact that a large inflow of new immigrants will have on local communities.

But even the prospect of spending years in crowded tents with no stable home does not seem to be deterring the Syrians who continue to flee their country in droves. On Sunday, Sept 14, Hungarian police detained 5,809 refugees, the highest number to cross the Mediterranean since . . . The previous day when 4,330 were held back!
Article Comprehension

1. According to the UNHCR how many people were living as refugees at the end of 2014? What will these people have to endure before they are allowed to become citizens of a new country?
2. Why are so many Syrian residents fleeing the country? What countries are they going to?
3. What excuse did Germany give for closing its borders a week after it promised to allow all refugees free access? What according to the author is the real reason?
4. Select four words that you do not know the meaning of. Look up their meanings. List the words along with their definitions below.

Critical Thinking Challenge

What are some of the ways in which people can help refugees?