A REFUGEE is a person who has been forced to leave their own country in order to escape war, persecution or a natural disaster. In legal terms, before a displaced person is termed a ‘refugee’ they are known as an ‘asylum seeker’. This means they have to prove that their case is genuine before they are allowed to remain in the country they have fled to. The simple United Nations definition agreed in 1951 during the Convention on Refugees is: … someone who has fled their country due to ‘a well founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion …’.

Europe has attracted many refugees since the second half of the 20th century. Despite the continent’s recent economic turmoil, life in Europe is still seen as comparatively attractive in contrast to countries with extremist governments, extreme racial or religious persecution, high unemployment or civil unrest.

In many other parts of the world, ‘internally displaced people’ are included in refugee figures. ‘Internally displaced person’ refers to anyone who moves from one part of a country to another to escape natural human disasters such as floods, wars or famine. Although rare in Western Europe, one example is when the former Yugoslavia split violently into several new nations (Figure 1) in the 1990s.

It is important that the term ‘refugee’ is not confused with ‘migrant’. For example, the British government’s Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) announced in January that 2.1 million migrants had arrived in Britain between 1995 and 2010. However, many of these migrants came legally from other European Union countries such as Poland to find work.

Under the 1967 Protocol, refugees were divided into two groups:
- economic migrants who voluntarily leave their homes to seek a better life
- political migrants forced to leave their country for their own safety.

In recent years, members of the Protocol have interpreted the definitions of economic and political refugees in different ways. This has caused variations in how individual European countries (for example) accept or help international refugees.

However, in recent times many European countries that signed the original Protocol have begun to feel under increasing pressure from voters to reduce the number of refugees they accept.
This has been done in three main ways, by:

- reducing the financial benefits paid to refugees
- reducing the quality of social services given to migrants
- accelerating the rate at which refugees’ requests for asylum are processed.

In addition, most European countries have set up detention centres to hold asylum seekers while their claims are being assessed.

This pressure to reduce the number of refugees entering Europe has come from two real (or imaginary) fears held by sizable groups of European voters.

1. Refugees are increasingly seen by some groups as a ‘financial burden’ on the welfare and social systems during a time of financial cutbacks.

2. Some citizens in West European countries have doubts about accepting large groups of ‘foreigners’ into their countries following such terrorist attacks as those of 9/11 in New York and the bombing of a train in 2004 near Atocha station in Madrid.

Consequently, several governments, including the British government, have since passed legislation which makes it easier to expel refugees who cannot provide confirmable evidence that theirs is a ‘just case’.

**Refugee myths**

According to the United Nations Refugee High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), by the end of 2010, out of a total of 43.7 million people displaced from their homes worldwide, an estimated total of 15.4 million people could be classified as ‘refugees’.

Although refugees and asylum seekers have often been singled out by some political groups in Western Europe as a potential ‘problem’, 80% of the world’s refugees actually live in camps in less economically developed countries. These camps are usually located just across the border in some neighbouring country. In 2010, for example, most of the estimated 10.6 million refugees from Iraq and Afghanistan were living in neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, Iran, Jordan and Syria.

**Refugees – the current situation in Europe**

According to the UNHCR, the number of claims for refugee status in the 38 countries in Europe actually fell from 60% of all asylum applications worldwide in 2005 to 45% by 2009. And within the 27 members of the European Union, a total of 235,900 asylum-seeker claims were lodged in 2010 compared with 247,300 in 2009, a 5% drop.

However, during the first six months of 2011 numbers in Europe began to rise again, with 130,000 asylum applications being lodged across the 38 West European countries. This represents an increase of 16,600 or 16% over the same period in 2010. Of these 38 countries, France received the most asylum requests, with Armenians forming the largest single group, followed by citizens of the Ivory Coast.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country or region</th>
<th>% claims change since first six months of 2010</th>
<th>Claims total</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Europe: all 38 countries</td>
<td>+16</td>
<td>130,000</td>
<td>This reverses a decline in claims in 2010.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>+11</td>
<td>26,100</td>
<td>1,700 claims were received from Armenians, 1,000 from Ivory Coast citizens, and 2,300 from Kosovars from Serbia and Kosovo.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>+29</td>
<td>20,100</td>
<td>12,600 claims were received from Afghans, 1,600 from Somalis and 1,500 Kosovars.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK</td>
<td>+12</td>
<td>12,200</td>
<td>1,700 Pakistani claims were received, and 700 Libyan claims, but claims from Zimbabwe declined by 61%.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2: Some trends in European asylum-seeker claims, January–July 2011**

Source: UNHCR, Statistical Overview of Asylum Applications Lodged in Europe and Selected Non-European Countries, First Half 2011

Germany, in second place, received 20,100 applicants in six months, a 29% increase over 2010. Of these, 25% were from Serbia and Kosovo, formerly part of the old Yugoslavia (see Figures 1 and 2). France has had traditionally strong links with Armenia and has a large Armenian community, while Germany’s trade links with the former Yugoslavia and the present seven independent republics remains strong.

Elsewhere, there was a surge of refugees from Libya and Tunisia, mainly into Italy. Figure 2 summarises asylum seeker trends for Europe in the first half of 2011, with examples of claims received by France, Germany and the UK.

**Economic migrants**

Over the last thirty years many migrants from West and North Africa have entered mainland Europe (Figure 3). An estimated 4.6 million such migrants now live in Western Europe. Many enter illegally by three main routes:

- by boat to the Canary Islands
- by boat to southern Spain or Italy (the islands of Lampedusa and Sicily – Figure 5)
- by boat to Malta.
Some economic migrants from north and west Africa also reach the Spanish territories (or enclaves) of Melilla and Ceuta (Figure 1). These enclaves are cut off from surrounding Morocco by high wire fences. However, migrants have been known to swim around these. Refugees are then held in detention centres while their cases are heard.

Case Study

Italy and Lampedusa

Lampedusa (Figure 4) is a small Italian island which lies closer to Tunisia (70 km) than to Sicily in Italy. Tunisia was the first of the Arab countries to experience an uprising against their leaders in 2010, part of the so-called ‘Arab Spring’ which then spread to other countries such as Egypt, Libya and Syria.

By June 2011, varying estimates of from 15,000 to 40,000 mainly Tunisian and Libyan refugees were crammed into refugee camps on the tiny Italian island. Even so, this is estimated to be only 2% of the refugees who fled these countries. Thousands more have been sent to camps on mainland Italy, creating pressures on a country that is currently experiencing major economic difficulties.

The main refugee camp on Lampedusa was overcrowded early in 2012 with more than 3,000 inmates, while many refugees are living in rough camps across the island. The situation was so bad in 2011 that an Italian naval vessel was sent in March to prevent a ship landing 1,600 Tunisian migrants.

Later, in September 2011, the BBC reported that 1,500 illegal immigrants had drowned while trying to cross illegally into Europe from Libya.

Meanwhile local people were reported as being ‘swamped’ by the refugee problem on their island (Figure 5).

Trends and consequences – some thoughts about the future

Many governments are now increasingly sensitive to voter pressures to reduce or repatriate refugees. Many countries such as the UK have now speeded up the process of hearing asylum-seeker cases.

In France, an example of this ‘hardening’ of European attitudes was France’s ban in April 2011 on women wearing the burqa and niqab. Both garments cover most of the wearer’s face and have been traditionally worn by some groups of women in Egypt, Iran, Yemen, Syria and Saudi Arabia. Violent attacks on women wearing these garments were reported in French cities in 2011.

Similarly, riots by refugees in Lampedusa have created negative images, while many voters are confused by the fact that new asylum seekers are not allowed to take jobs until their cases are heard – a process that can take months or years.

While Europe is likely to continue to assist refugees in the near future, a less sympathetic approach appears to be developing in many countries.
Activities

1. Re-read the introductory section to this unit and answer the following questions.
   (a) Under international law, what is the difference between a refugee and an asylum seeker?
   (b) Who or what provided the first international definition of ‘refugee’ in 1951?
   (c) What is the difference between a refugee and an international migrant who legally moves within the countries of the European Union?
   (d) How many migrants are thought to have come to the UK between 1995 and 2010, according to Britain’s Migration Advisory Committee?

2. Figure 1 shows the location of the former Yugoslavia. With the aid of an atlas, name the seven former parts of Yugoslavia that have now split into independent states.

3. Use Figure 1 to answer the following questions.
   (a) Which particular European country accepted large groups of refugees when the former Yugoslavia split apart in the early 1990s?
   (b) From which former Russian state has France recently accepted large groups of refugees?
   (c) Name two European countries that have been traditional ‘stepping stones’ for North Africans coming to Europe.
   (d) Name three countries from which the UK has recently accepted groups of refugees.
   (e) According to the UNHCR, how many refugees sought asylum-seeker status in Europe in the first six months of 2011?

4. Copy the statement below and then fill in the blank spaces. You should refer to the text under the heading ‘The political status of refugees’.
   An international agreement is also known as a _______. Refugees were divided into two groups: _______ and _______ refugees. In 1967, a new set of guidelines on refugees was drawn up. However, in recent years many states have become concerned about accepting new waves of refugees. They have taken steps to protect themselves by various means, for example by reducing ________, reducing the quality of ________, speeding up the ________ of asylum seekers’ claims and setting up ________ to hold asylum seekers while their cases are being investigated. Many European voters have raised concerns about refugees following events such as the _______ terrorist disaster in New York and other terrorist attacks such as the 2004 bombing at Atocha Station in _______.

5. Study Figure 3. You may also wish to refer to an atlas. Explain how the geographical locations of the following places often appear attractive to African refugees seeking a way into Europe:
   • the Canary Islands
   • Malta
   • the Spanish north African enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla.

6. Produce a sketch map of Figure 4 to show the location of the Italian island of Lampedusa. Use the information under the heading ‘Italy and Lampedusa’ as a source with which to annotate your map. Your annotations should provide information on recent events on the island involving refugees from Libya and Tunisia.

7. Study Figure 2.
   (a) Design a suitable graph which compares asylum-seeker applications in the first six months of 2011 in parts of Europe. Your graph should show: ‘% claims change’ and ‘Claims totals’ for Europe, France, Germany and the UK.
   (b) Write a short paragraph explaining your graph.

8. Find pictures of the burqa and the naqib on a web search. These traditional women’s garments have been banned by France. In groups, discuss your reactions to the French ban. Also debate whether there might be situations in other countries such as the UK when the wearing of these traditional garments might be viewed as inappropriate. Report your views to the class as a whole.

9. Study Figure 6.
   Write a letter to your local MP giving your reactions to the threats to asylum seekers in Glasgow. You may wish to agree or disagree with the events reported in that city.

10. Use the internet to research one of the following topics:
    (a) refugees in Lampedusa
    (b) Kosovars in Germany
    (c) asylum seekers in the UK
    (d) North Africans in Italy.
    Produce in your own words a short report on your findings.

Figure 6: A threat to remove asylum seekers from rented council housing in Glasgow

Source: Adapted from a BBC news report, 20 November 2010