



A refugee crisis for the world

● Exodus from Syrian civil war is overwhelming region - UN ● Britain may be asked to take thousands of displaced people ● Aid officials say population flight is becoming permanent



The Zaatari refugee camp near the Jordanian city of Mafraq shelters 115,000 Syrian refugees, posing a humanitarian crisis and a threat to global security, say UN officials Photograph: Mandel Ngan/AP

Martin Chulov Zaatari, Jordan
Mark Rice-Oxley

Britain and other western nations may be asked to accept tens of thousands of Syrian refugees because the exodus from the civil war is overwhelming countries in the region, the UN's refugee chief has warned.

With no end to the war in sight, the flight of nearly 2 million people from Syria over the past two years is showing every sign of becoming a permanent population shift, like the Palestinian crises of 1948 and 1967, with grave implications for countries such as Lebanon and Jordan, UN and other humanitarian aid officials say.

One in six people in Lebanon are now Syrian refugees. The biggest camp in Jordan has become the country's fourth-largest city. In addition to those who have crossed borders, at least four million Syr-

ians are believed to have been displaced within their own country, meaning that more than a quarter of the population has been uprooted.

In an interview with the Guardian, António Guterres, the United Nations high commissioner for refugees, said the situation was already far more than just a humanitarian crisis. If a resolution to the conflict was not found within months, the UN will look to resettle tens of thousands of Syrian refugees in countries better able to afford to host them, including Britain. Germany has already offered to take 5,000, but other offers have been "limited", Guterres said.

"We are facing in the Middle East something that is more than a humanitarian crisis, more than a regional crisis, it is becoming a real threat to global peace and security," Guterres said.

"We are already seeing the multiplication of security incidents in Iraq and Leba-

non, and Jordan is facing a very difficult economic situation."

Guterres compared the Syrian refugee issue to that of Iraqis during the last decade, when more than 100,000 were resettled away from the region. "If things go on for a prolonged period of time then resettlement will become a central part of our strategy," he said. "We would like when the time comes ... to be able to launch a resettlement programme as massive as the one for Iraqis."

The Syrian exodus has already surpassed almost every other refugee crisis that international organisations have dealt with in the past 40 years. The Yugoslav wars of the 1990s provide the closest parallel, with both conflicts having a strong ethnic-sectarian dimension and the crumbling of state control raising the spectre of partition.

The knock-on effect on regional countries has been telling. Tensions between



Crisis in Syria

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refugee communities and local populations have increased dramatically in Jordan and Lebanon, as the influx of people piles pressure on local services such as schools and hospitals, and disrupts job markets. The upshot has been a greater effort by Syria's neighbours to "manage" the flow of refugees into their countries.

"Turkey and Jordan have become so overwhelmed and at the same time with some very worrying consequences on the security point of view, with the infiltration of armed people, that the border has become managed, which means refugees are still coming but they have to come in a gradual way which means we have a number of people stranded waiting to cross," Guterres said.

Some refugees have found life so wretched in camps that they have

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