

Number of displaced people worldwide hits new high

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The United Nations Human Rights Council's (UNHRC) annual Global Trends Report for 2016, released Monday, shows that the endless military conflicts and state violence throughout the world have now displaced more people than at any time in the seven-decade history of UNHCR.

The Global Trends Report is published every year to analyze the changes in the ongoing crises of migration, including the plight of refugees, internally displaced people, people who have returned to their countries or areas of origin, asylum seekers, stateless people and "other populations of concern." The data analyzed in the report are based on information available as of May 15, 2017.

The current number of displaced people, which increased by 300,000 from the previous year, is now close to 66 million people worldwide—the highest figure ever recorded. Over the past two decades, the global population of forcibly displaced people has nearly doubled from 33.9 million in 1997 to 65.6 million in 2016.

This number is composed from three categories of "displaced people." The first category is refugees which, currently at 22.5 million, also stands as the highest number ever seen. The largest contributor to refugees (5.5 million) is the result of US imperialism's regime-change operation in Syria.

The recent surge of Syrian refugees occurred between 2012 and 2015, during the height of the CIA-stoked civil war aimed at overthrowing the government of Bashar al-Assad. To date, the five-year civil war has killed nearly a half-million people and displaced nearly two-thirds of the country's population, or some 12 million people. Following Syria, Colombia (7.7 million) and Afghanistan (4.7 million) continued to have the second and third biggest refugee population.

This was followed by Iraq (4.2 million) and South Sudan, which has the world's fastest growing displaced population, with 3.3 million having fled their homes by the end of the year.

The latter has emerged as a major contributor to refugees due to the ongoing civil war, which was sparked by the 2011 neo-colonial carve-up of the East African country by US imperialism waged under the guise of South Sudan "independence."

The second category is displacement of people inside their own countries. These numbers saw a slight decrease from 40.3 million at the end of 2016, compared to 40.8 million a year earlier. The most significant internal displacement situations remain in Syria, Colombia and Iraq. The problem of internal displacement, however, is not limited to these countries. People become displaced daily in virtually every country and this accounts for almost two-thirds of the global forced displacement total.

The last category is asylum seekers, which is defined as people who have fled their country and are seeking international protection as refugees. The number of people seeking asylum globally at the close of 2016 was 2.8 million.

Among the report's most important findings is that new displacement continues to be very high. Of the total 65.6 million people forcibly displaced globally, 10.3 million became displaced in 2016. To grasp the scope of this figure one should consider that at this rate one person becomes displaced every three seconds.

Just as damning as the high level of new displacements is its opposite, the number of refugees in "protracted refugee situations," i.e., those who are in a situation lasting an extended period due to anti-democratic asylum and immigration laws. Some two-thirds of all refugees, 11.6 million, were in protracted

refugee situations at the end of 2016. Of these, 4.1 million were in a situation lasting 20 years or more.

Children under the age of 18 make up half the world's refugees. The devastating effects of living through being forced to flee from home and then enduring a protracted period without a stable home, access to education, quality health care and other necessities has the most damaging impact on children, the most vulnerable layer of the population. Horribly, in 2016 about 75,000 asylum claims were received from children traveling alone or separated from their parents. The report notes that this number is likely underestimating the true figure.

Due to the chaotic nature of the circumstances, there are many people who go uncounted. For example, UNHCR estimates that at least 10 million people were without a nationality or at risk of statelessness at the end of 2016 but data recorded by governments and made available to UNHCR for this report were limited to 3.2 million stateless people in 75 countries.

Chilling manifestations of this crisis appear daily throughout the world. Last week, Mexican authorities found 112 migrants alive, packed into a single truck traveling along a highway that connects the southern states of Chiapas and Tabasco. The migrants, which included four babies and 23 minors, were traveling mainly from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras—all fleeing extreme poverty and violence produced by decades of US backing for right-wing governments and death squads.

The Italian Coast Guard recovered eight corpses and reported at least 52 people missing from two incidents involving large numbers of people on flimsy dinghies off the coast of Libya last weekend. More than 2,500 people were rescued in over a dozen search-and-rescue efforts coordinated by the Italian Coast Guard over just a two-day period.

Refugees and migrants, if they survive their journey, often live in subhuman conditions. In one refugee settlement in South Sudan, 15 young children, all under the age of five, recently died in a botched measles vaccination campaign, which saw people as young as 12 years old administering the vaccines. These camps hold as many as 15,000 refugees at time without a single doctor on site.

This crisis is taking place against the backdrop of rising right-wing xenophobic demagoguery being peddled

by bourgeois governments throughout the world, including Angela Merkel in Germany and Donald Trump in the United States, and anti-foreigner agitation spewed by political parties spanning the extreme right to the pseudo left.

Acting in complete opposition to the sentiments of the masses who have come out in droves to defend the rights of immigrants, the ruling classes of each country are scapegoating immigrants for the problems caused by their domestic policy of job-cutting and austerity while continuing the reckless warmongering, which has forced millions to flee for their lives.



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