

'Ghost Ships' expose EU policy towards refugees

By John Murphy, Jan 2015

Would any betting syndicate give anything but very short odds on the numbers of people seeking protection across the world not increasing this year? The UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) has released figures of people fleeing persecution, armed conflict or human rights abuse in the first six months of 2014. It predicted that, if the rate continued, 2014 would have seen around 700,000 people claiming asylum in 44 industrial countries (UNHCR website).

The two largest groups of those fleeing persecution came last year from Syria and Iraq.

The tragedies of the 'ghost' ships in the Mediterranean since the start of this year have highlighted two factors for receiving countries in the EU to consider. First, that a significant number of the people making these desperate attempts are those fleeing Syria and Iraq, as well as coming from Libya. In other words, these are victims of armed conflict and quite possibly torture, too, fearing for their lives – a criterion for claiming asylum. The other feature is the involvement of smugglers indulging in the particularly heinous practice of abandoning the boats and the people on board to the whim of the currents. Smugglers increase where people are desperate and there is no legal way to flee to find protection.

What is the EU's response? Responses seem divided between a humane approach, consistent with international agreement when people are in danger at sea, of making rescue the priority and then dealing with the immigration issue once people are safe and restored. The Italian coastguard has exemplified this approach. The other response has been to prioritise deterring people from seeking sanctuary by withdrawing search and rescue services. The facts about who is aboard the boats flatly contradict the argument that our welfare benefits serve as a 'pull factor'. And yet this is the reason the UK government gave for agreeing with other EU nations to replace search and rescue with an aggressive 'find and return' policy. Such a policy is misguided, at the least, when faced with refugees in fear for their lives.

The International Organisation for Migration, as well as the UNHCR, calls on EU governments to work towards establishing legal and managed routes of migration from North Africa and the Middle East.

But I guess any betting syndicate will give you only long odds on that happening.

John Murphy