

Global refugee crisis worst since World War II

By Joseph Kishore
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The global refugee crisis is more dire than at any point since the end of the Second World War, according to a report released yesterday by Amnesty International.

The report provides a partial picture of the disaster produced by global capitalism and the operations of imperialism in different parts of the world, with a focus on Syria, North Africa and the Mediterranean, Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Tens of millions of people have been forced to flee their homes, traveling great distances in an attempt to escape war, economic devastation and political persecution. Refugees often face deplorable conditions in the countries to which they flee, and with increasing regularity are turned away or perish during the journey.

Amnesty notes that in 2013, for the first time since the 1940s, the number of refugees was estimated at more than 50 million. In the ensuing two years, millions more have become refugees.

The situation in Syria and its neighboring countries in the Middle East is particularly dire. “More than half of Syria’s population is displaced,” including those displaced internally, according to the report. “Some four million women, men and children have fled the country and are refugees, making this one of the biggest refugee crises in history.”

Amnesty castigates the major powers for failing to provide assistance to the surging refugee population, many of whom have ended up in neighboring Lebanon (where 20 percent of the population now consists of Syrian refugees), Jordan and Turkey. It notes that the United Nations humanitarian appeal for \$4.5 billion to aid Syrian refugees had reached only 23 percent of its goal by early June.

The entire UN emergency fund for Syrian refugees is less than one percent of the annual budget of the US

military.

“The total number of places offered to refugees from Syria is less than 90,000, only 2.2 percent of the refugees in the main host countries (Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey),” the report states. Faced with a surging population and limited funding, the World Food Programme has been forced to reduce its level of food assistance to less than \$0.46 a day to Syrian refugees in Jordan and \$0.62 a day to refugees in Lebanon.

The desperate situation facing refugees from Syria exposes the “humanitarian” pretenses of imperialist operations in the region. The crisis is a direct result of the US-stoked civil war in the country, which has included the financing of Islamic fundamentalist organizations in the campaign to topple Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad.

The Obama administration is now utilizing the crisis created by American imperialism to justify the expansion of military operations in both Syria and Iraq, ostensibly targeting the Islamic State. The 2003 invasion and occupation of Iraq itself produced millions of refugees.

Amnesty also points to new restrictions on border crossing imposed by Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan, all US allies. Turkey has closed almost all of its border gates to Syria. Over the weekend, Turkish military forces used water cannon against refugees fleeing fighting across the border from the southeastern Turkish town of Akcakale.

The report says nothing about the origins of the crisis. The civil war in Syria is also a main driving force behind the sharp increase in the number of refugees seeking to cross the Mediterranean. Many Syrians have fled to Libya where they, along with refugees from other parts of the Middle East and Africa, face disastrous conditions in a country torn apart by the

NATO war in 2011.

Libya is riven by rival Islamist militias, many of which were financed and armed as part of the US-led campaign to overthrow the government of Muammar Gaddafi. Refugees in Libya are subjected to harassment, torture, sexual assault, extortion and forced labor while seeking access to boats to take them across the sea to Italy.

In April, two boats packed with refugees sank in the Mediterranean, killing over 1,200 people. In the first five months of this year, 1,865 people have died attempting the journey, compared to 425 during the same period last year. The report notes that the “dramatic increase in the number of lives lost” is “partly due to the decision by Italy and the European Union (EU) to end the Italian navy operation Mare Nostrum at the end of 2014 and replace it with a much more limited EU operation.”

The response of the European imperialist powers, which backed the war in Libya as part of an attempt to reassert control over their former colonies, has been to strengthen “Fortress Europe” and block the flow of refugees. Last month, the EU agreed to a quota system to house 20,000 refugees, a tiny fraction of those seeking to flee Libya.

At the same time, the European powers are citing the refugee crisis as a rationale to prepare military strikes in Libya itself, aimed in the first instance at destroying the boats used to transport people across the Mediterranean.

A similar disaster has unfolded in Southeast Asia and the Asia Pacific in the first part of 2015, as boats filled with refugees from Myanmar and Bangladesh have been turned away by Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Australia. It is estimated that 300 people have died at sea so far this year due to starvation, dehydration or abuse.

The Amnesty report notes that the initial refusal of governments in the region to accept the refugees was a “flagrant violation of their international obligations.” It states that “Australia’s offshore processing policy—whereby it takes asylum-seekers who attempt to reach Australia by sea to detention centres in Nauru and Manus Island (Papua New Guinea)—is particularly egregious... [T]he deliberately harsh, humiliating conditions at the Australian-run detention facility were designed to pressure asylum seekers to return to their

country of origin, regardless of whether or not they were refugees.”

The Australian government of Prime Minister Tony Abbott is currently facing allegations that it has paid people smugglers to take asylum seekers back to Indonesia, allegations that the government has tacitly acknowledged. These illegal actions underscore Australia’s central role in spearheading the persecution of refugees throughout the region.

In Sub-Saharan Africa there is an estimated population of 3 million refugees, the result of waves of people fleeing wars and conflicts in different parts of the continent, including Nigeria, South Sudan, the Central African Republic and Burundi. These wars are invariably connected to struggles over natural resources, with the imperialist powers viewing the deeply impoverished region to be of interest only as a source of oil and minerals.

The Amnesty report’s conclusions are predictable, consisting of impotent calls for governments to do more. “The global refugee crisis will not be solved unless the international community recognizes that it is a global problem and deals with it as such,” the report states.

The catastrophic situation facing refugees, however, is one particularly horrific expression of a bankrupt social and economic system. The surge of refugees is a direct product of unending war and social counterrevolution. The persecution of those uprooted by imperialism is inseparable from the attack on the democratic and social rights of the working class in every country.

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