

Number of asylum-seekers remains stable over 2009, UNHCR figures show

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GENEVA, March 23 (UNHCR) – UN High Commissioner for Refugees António Guterres on Tuesday dismissed claims that asylum-seekers are flooding into developed nations as his agency released provisional statistics showing that the overall number of asylum-seekers in industrialized nations was stable in 2009.

"The notion that there is a flood of asylum-seekers into richer countries is a myth," said Guterres. "Despite what some populists claim, our data shows that the numbers have remained stable."

The data in UNHCR's provisional statistical report, which measures asylum levels and trends in 44 industrialized nations, showed that, compared to 2008, the number of asylum-seekers last year remained the same with 377,000 applications. This was despite regional disparities highlighted by the report.

The number of asylum applications increased in 19 of the countries and fell in the other 25 under review. Of note was the Nordic region, which recorded a 13 per cent increase with 51,100 new applicants, the highest in six years.

By contrast, the number of applications in southern Europe went down by 33 per cent, with 50,100 claims. This was driven by significant declines in Italy (-42 per cent), Turkey (-40 per cent) and Greece (-20 per cent).

Afghans topped the list of asylum applicants with 26,800 submissions, representing a 45 per cent increase over 2008. Iraqis dropped to second place with some 24,000

claims, while Somalis moved to third with 22,600 asylum applications. They were followed by people from the Russian Federation, China, Serbia and Nigeria.

The United States remained the main destination country for the fourth year. It accounted for 13 per cent of the claims representing an estimated 49,000 people, many of them from China. Second was France, receiving 42,000 new applications in 2009, a 19 per cent hike over 2008. This was due to increasing claims from citizens of Serbia originating predominantly from Kosovo.

Canada, while still ranking third among receiving countries, saw the number of asylum applications fall by 10 per cent to 33,000 after a drop in Mexican and Haitian claims. The United Kingdom came next with 29,800 applications, down on the year before. Claims in Germany increased by 25 per cent with 27,600 asylum applications last year. These five countries received 48 per cent of the total claims recorded in 2009.

In terms of regions of origin, nearly half of the 377,000 applicants came from Asia and the Middle East (45 per cent), followed by Africa (29 per cent), Europe (15.5 per cent) and the Americas (9 per cent).

The yearly UNHCR report analyzes asylum levels and trends in the 27 European Union member states as well as Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, Turkey and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. It also covers the United States, Canada, Australia, Japan, New Zealand and the Republic of Korea.

By Fatoumata Lejeune-Kaba in Geneva