

Thursday 14th April

UK turning a blind eye to suffering on its doorstep by failing to protect vulnerable refugees and migrants – aid agencies

The UK is failing in its responsibility to protect some of the world's most vulnerable people who have been displaced by conflict, violence, persecution and poverty, a group of 13 aid and refugee agencies said today.

The lack of adequate response from the UK and European governments to the more than a million refugees and migrants who arrived in Europe in 2015 has compounded the suffering and created a humanitarian crisis on Britain's doorstep

Next week it will be a year since up to 800 people drowned trying to reach Lampedusa, a tragedy that spurred the EU into holding its first summit on the migrant crisis. But successive summits have done little to improve the situation - the deal struck between the EU and Turkey to deport migrants from Greece is the latest callous attempt to shut the door on desperate people who have already fled their homes and risked a treacherous sea crossing.

Oxfam, the British Refugee Council, the International Rescue Committee (IRC-UK) and ten other agencies say it's not enough for the UK government to provide aid for refugees in countries like Lebanon and Jordan. The UK has an obligation to offer a safe haven to its fair share of refugees and do all it can to ensure protection for people on the move, whatever their legal status.

Maya Mailer, Oxfam's Head of Humanitarian Policy said: "The UK is trying to pretend that this is someone else's problem, and that refugees and migrants could and should be dealt with elsewhere. But people who are desperate will take huge risks to reach safety.

"The UK needs to accept its moral responsibility to offer a safe haven to the world's poorest and most vulnerable – men, women and children who have been made homeless by war, violence and disasters."

In the report *A Safe Haven?*, the agencies lay out the steps the UK needs to take to respond to the global displacement crisis, including:

- expand the safe and legal routes to reach protection in the UK

- improve the humanitarian response in Europe including humane reception conditions at borders and in transit countries
- ensure access to a fair, effective and humane asylum system
- improve conditions in countries hosting large numbers of displaced people and
- tackle the causes behind forced displacement

British Refugee Council Chief Executive Maurice Wren said: "While European leaders demonstrate a collective failure of political leadership and moral courage, people who have escaped war and tyranny are met with barbed wire and tear gas, mums are forced to bathe their infants in dirty puddles, and yet more refugee children drown on Europe's shores.

"European governments, including the UK, must take a long hard look at themselves and ask is this the best they can do? We say that it doesn't have to be this way. Today we're presenting a roadmap for change which prioritises saving lives, solidarity and safe passage."

Melanie Ward, Associate Director of Policy and Advocacy for IRC-UK said: "As chaos continues to unfold in Europe, refugees face inhumane conditions. Thousands are losing their lives and their dignity. In the context of a rapidly growing global refugee crisis, the UK and Europe cannot turn away from protecting refugees on their doorstep.

"There is an urgent need for the UK to live up to its global responsibility by expanding pathways to protection for refugees seeking sanctuary. Without alternatives, thousands are left with no other option but to turn to smugglers and embark on dangerous journeys."

Notes to editors:

The 13 aid agencies are: Action Aid UK, the British Refugee Council, CAFOD, Christian Aid, Doctors of the World, Freedom from Torture, IRC-UK, Islamic Relief, Oxfam, Plan UK, Refugee Action, Scottish Refugee Council and World Vision.

This comment relates solely to the matter in hand and does not imply support for or opposition to the UK's membership of the EU. Oxfam believes that is a matter for the British people.

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