

# Syrian Conflict Boosts Number Of Asylum Claims in Industrialized Countries

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GENEVA — A new report finds asylum claims in 44 industrialized countries rose sharply last year due in large part to the ongoing Syrian conflict. The United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) reports nearly one-half million claims were registered in 2012, the highest annual total since 2003.

The U.N. refugee agency reports new and old conflicts last year contributed to an 8 percent increase in asylum applications in 44 industrialized countries. Afghanistan tops the list of asylum seekers with 36,600 claims with Syria close behind.

But U.N. officials call the number of people seeking asylum in the industrialized countries a tempest in a teapot. UNHCR chief statistician Tarek Abou Chabake says four out of five refugees remain within their own region and never reach the industrialized countries.

“An example of Syria is the best example where most refugees actually have remained in the countries neighboring Syria and have not crossed borders into Europe or the U.S. or otherwise,” said Chabak. “So, the evidence shows and it has been fairly consistent over the last few years that most people actually remain within, at least the continent they are fleeing from and in most cases within neighboring countries.”

The UNHCR reports more than 1.1 million Syrian refugees fled into Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq with 190,000 people fleeing Mali into neighboring Mauritania, Niger and Burkina Faso and 400,000 Congolese seeking refuge in neighboring African countries.

The report says Europe, mainly Germany, France and Sweden, received the most claims for asylum in 2012. But it says the single largest recipient of asylum requests overall was the United States, with most coming from Mexico, El Salvador and China.

UNHCR Director for the Division of International Protection, Volker Turk, says many industrialized countries profess their commitment to asylum. But, the truth, he says, is that many of these same governments are adopting an array of measures to deter arrivals from gaining access to the asylum system.

“In the last two decades, states have adopted a lot of measures that are not necessarily the ones opening border,” said Turk. “One of the problems that we face generally is that it leads to a de facto criminalization of people trying to enter because they do not have a visa. They use smugglers at times. They try to enter “illegally.”

U.N. refugee chief Antonio Guterres says wars are driving more and more people to seek asylum. He says this makes it ever more critical for nations to uphold the international system of asylum. He is urging countries to keep their borders open for people fleeing for their lives.