

# Doctors Without Borders provides support to people on the move



*Meike Schwarz, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) (Germany)*

When yet another boat capsized in the Mediterranean Sea in February 2015 and claimed the lives of more than 300 refugees, Doctors Without Borders (MSF) could no longer just stand and watch. We publicly appealed to the European Union (EU) to change its migration and border policy and to stop endangering the lives of thousands of people. “The EU’s restrictive border policy gives desperate refugees no choice but to take the dangerous route over the ocean,” according to Manu Moncada, coordinator of MSF’s missions in Italy. “Italy and the other EU member states finally have to take responsibility and seriously address the crisis to avoid further unnecessary deaths” (Press release: MSF calls on European Union to take its responsibility to stop putting migrants’ lives at risk: <http://www.msf.org/article/msf-calls-european-union-take-its-responsibility-stop-putting-migrants%E2%80%99-lives-risk>).

## **51 million people forcibly displaced from their homes**

The number of refugees worldwide has increased dramatically in recent years. Conflict and crisis in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Libya, South Sudan and Central African Republic cause people to leave their homes, hoping to find refuge in a host country. According to UN estimates, 51.2 million people worldwide are currently forcibly displaced – the highest number since the Second World War. Most are sheltering either within their country of origin or in neighbouring states. In Syria, there are some 6.5 million internally displaced people, while almost three million registered refugees from Syria have sought refuge in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt (UNHCR: Mid-Year Trend 2014).

## **Europe seals itself off**

Considering these numbers, the EU’s response is very modest. Just 1.5 million recognised refugees currently live in the EU (UNHCR: Mid-Year Trend 2014). The legal path into the EU is very restrictive and stays closed for most people looking for shelter for themselves and their families. This is why so many people decide to risk everything by undertaking dangerous and potentially life-threatening journeys to reach its shores.

## **The path to Europe is paved with suffering**

MSF provides humanitarian and medical aid to refugees and migrants in countries around the world, including Iraq, South Sudan and Central African Republic. We also provide medical assistance to migrants at different stages of their journey to reach Europe. The most common symptoms encountered by our teams are dehydration, caused by long journeys without sufficient drinking water; hypothermia, due to being cold and wet for days at a time; muscular-skeletal complaints from sitting or standing in cramped conditions; and cuts and bruises inflicted by human traffickers. Patients told us that while traveling through Libya, they witnessed their fellow travellers suffocating or dying of thirst on overcrowded trucks.

## **Dangerous route over the Mediterranean Sea**

According to German human rights organisation ProAsyl, at least 23,000 people have died or disappeared in the past 15 years while trying to reach Europe, most of them in the Mediterranean Sea. Chiara Montaldo, MSF's project coordinator in Sicily, feels distressed whenever she looks out at the open sea. "When I look at the sea, it no longer has the same meaning for me," she says. "When the sea is rough, I hope that they won't set out, and I worry for those who have already left, whose fate we may never know."

MSF's teams are very often the first people that the refugees meet after having crossed the sea. "We don't like the idea that, after all they have been through, there are only armed men to greet them," says Montaldo. The refugees arriving in Sicily come from different countries and widely varying backgrounds. What unites them is the depth of their need that pushes them to undertake such a dangerous journey.

## **Refugees are not welcome in Europe**

Once they arrive in Europe, refugees are too often confronted with a reception system that is chaotic and sometimes inhumane. On the Aegean islands, for example, people are kept in detention in desperately poor conditions. In 2014, 14,000 people – more than 90 percent of them from Syria – risked the sea crossing from Turkey to the Greek islands on small boats. With too few places to accommodate them, many refugees found themselves spending nights in the open, exposed to the cold and rain (Press releases: Deutlich mehr Bootsflüchtlinge in der Ägäis <http://www.aerzte-ohne-grenzen.de/presse/deutlich-mehr-bootsfluechtlinge-der-aegeais> EU and Greece turn their backs on refugees arriving at Greek islands: <http://www.msf.org/article/eu-and-greece-turn-their-backs-refugees-arriving-greek-islands>).

Thousands of refugees from Syria and Afghanistan flee the desperate living conditions in Greece and Bulgaria and cross the Balkans to northern Europe. Many end up in Serbia, living in forests and ruined buildings. MSF teams are providing them with essential relief items, while calling on the local authorities, the UNHCR and the EU to provide them with protection. Alexander Zimble, coordinator of MSF's projects in the Balkans, says, "The EU member states finally have to recognise the frightening consequences of their policies and improve their asylum proceedings and reception conditions. Thousands of refugees and asylum seekers are being forsaken." (Press release: Serbia: Asylum seekers and migrants left in cold: <http://www.msf.org/article/serbia-asylum-seekers-and-migrants-left-cold>).

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