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One million people fled to Europe in 2015

By Andre Damon

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The wars stoked up by American and European imperialism in Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq have contributed to what could possibly be the largest refugee crisis in human history, with the number of people forced to flee their homes “exceeding 60 million for the first time,” the United Nations said last week.

Over a million of those refugees sought asylum in Europe, the Geneva-based International Organization for Migration (IOM) reported Monday.

“2015 will be remembered as a year of human suffering and migrant tragedies,” William Lacy Swing, the director general of the IOM, said in a statement.

Swing noted that more than 5,000 refugees had died while fleeing, including 3,692 who drowned in the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas, while “millions have been made into scapegoats and become the targets of xenophobic policies and alarmist rhetoric.”

Eleven more refugees, including three children, died Tuesday after their wooden boat capsized in the Aegean Sea. The route from Turkey to Greece across the Mediterranean Sea has become “the deadliest route for migrants on our planet,” according to the UN.

More than a third of refugees entering Europe are children. The Save the Children charity issued a sharply worded response to the latest figures, declaring that “Europe is doing too little to protect and help vulnerable refugee children and stop families drowning on our shores.” It declared, “When children are dying on our doorstep we need to take bolder action. There can be no bigger priority.”

Commenting on the figures, António Guterres, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, said, “It’s clear humanitarian actors are no longer able to provide the minimum support both in relation to core protection and lifesaving activities.”

“If you become a refugee today your chances of going home are lower than at any time in more than 30 years,” declared Guterres. Only 124,000 international refugees returned in 2014, down from a million 10 years ago.

Having made “human rights” the watchword for bombing and plundering helpless countries, the Western powers stand exposed by the refugee crisis as completely indifferent to these same “human rights” when it comes to their own borders. Instead of providing aid and assistance to the thousands of people drowning on their shores, they are using the refugee crisis as a pretense to further escalate the drive to war and attack on democratic rights at home.

The German government, which has sought to posture as a supporter of refugees, has vastly expanded deportations while slashing social assistance to refugees. The country deported 18,363 people in 2015, nearly double the number deported in the previous year and up from 7,651 in 2012. A further 190,000 people currently reside in Germany whose applications for asylum have been denied, and live in constant fear of deportation. Behind the scenes, the German government is making plans to use the military to carry out mass deportations next year.

German authorities have spearheaded the drive by the EU to work out an agreement to pay Turkey some \$3 billion to stop refugees from the Middle East from entering Europe via a land route. Some 2.2 million people have fled to Turkey, where they have been prevented from entering Europe and kept in abhorrent conditions in refugee camps.

With most land routes into Europe closed off, refugees seeking to flee to Europe have been forced to make the perilous journey by sea onto the Greek islands over the tempestuous Aegean. Some 816,752 people have arrived by this route, compared to only about 30,000 who traveled by land, a testament to the brutal effectiveness of the EU’s attempts to seal its external borders.

Greece’s Syriza-led government, which in its election campaign this year sought to pander to the altruistic pro-refugee sentiments of Greek workers, has, together with its total capitulation to the austerity demands of European officials, acquiesced to its role as a border guard for the larger European powers.

To this end, the Greek Island of Lesbos, the birthplace of the lyric poet Sappho, has been turned into a giant internment camp. Some 450,000 refugees arrived in Lesbos this year, more than five times the number of island’s permanent inhabitants. Over 4,000 arrived on Monday alone.

The island is the site of the EU's first refugee "hot spot," a sanitized term used to describe what is little more than a concentration camp. Under police guard and surrounded by barbed wire, refugees are kept in squalid conditions.

Reuters, which was allowed to visit the "hot spot" but denied permission to take photographs, described the deplorable conditions facing refugees. "As night falls and temperatures drop to about 6 degrees Celsius (43 Fahrenheit) or lower, groups of people huddle among piles of suitcases, burning pieces of cardboard to keep warm. The dusty plot of land turns to mud each time it rains." Greece has promised the EU it would set up four more such miserable camps.

The one million refugees who have managed to enter Europe are among the five million people who have been newly displaced this year, according to figures released by the United Nations last week. This was on top of the 59.5 million who were displaced by the end of 2014.

But the UN figures cover only the first half of the year, before the enormous spike in people fleeing the Syrian Civil war as a result of intensified intervention by the Western powers. This means that the number of people displaced worldwide could hit over 70 million in 2015 once the figures are updated.

Fully half of those crossing the Mediterranean this year were refugees from Syria. Those fleeing the war in Afghanistan accounted for 20 percent, while those fleeing Iraq accounted for 7 percent. Thus, more than three quarters of those seeking refuge in Europe are seeking to escape wars directly stoked up by US and European imperialism in the Middle East.

The European powers have pledged to intensify their crackdown in the New Year. This month, The European Commission announced plans to double the funding and personnel of Frontex, the EU border patrol agency. It vowed to further militarize the organization, creating a force of "rapid intervention troops" provided with their own ships and helicopters to intercept and turn back refugees.