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UN reports rise in Afghan asylum seekers

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KABUL (Online): A report released Tuesday by the UN refugee agency on asylum in industrialized countries shows that new conflicts and a rising outflow from older crisis spots such as Afghanistan together contributed to a 20 per cent rise in asylum claims in 2011.

UNHCR's report, Asylum Levels and Trends in Industrialized Countries 2011, says that an estimated 441,300 asylum claims were recorded last year compared to 368,000 in 2010. The report covers 44 countries in Europe, North America, Australasia, and North-East Asia.

In relative terms, the largest increase was in southern Europe, which saw 66,800 asylum claims – a jump of 87 per cent. Most of these claims were from people who arrived by boat in Italy and Malta, but with a sharp increase also seen in Turkey.

The United Kingdom was the seventh largest recipient of new asylum-seekers in 2011 with 25,400 claims. This was the second lowest level in two decades.

“The large number of asylum claims clearly shows 2011 to have been a year of great difficulty for very many people. We can be thankful only that throughout this the international system of asylum has held firm,” said António Guterres, the UN's High Commissioner for Refugees. “Still, it is important to put these figures in perspective. The number of asylum claims received across all industrialized countries is still smaller than the population of Dadaab, a single refugee camp in northeast Kenya.”

Taken as a whole, the 38 countries of Europe together registered 327,200 claims, more than any other region and a 19 per cent increase over 2010. North America received 99,400 claims, almost

a quarter more than the total a year earlier. Japan and the Republic of Korea registered a record 2,900 claims, a 77 per cent increase over 2010.

Only the Nordic countries and Australasia saw asylum seeker numbers declining, with falls of 10 per cent (45,700 claims) and 9 per cent (11,800 claims) respectively.

Reflecting turmoil in West Africa and in the Arab world, asylum-seekers from Ivory Coast, Libya, Syria, and other countries reached record levels in 2011 with 16,700 more claims than in 2010.

The country of origin of the largest number of claimants was Afghanistan, with a 34 per cent increase over 2010 to 35,700. China remained the second largest source country (24,400 claimants) followed by Iraq (23,500).