



By: **Sharmila Devi**

Anti-immigrant rhetoric rises as West avoids the truth on refugee numbers



Ask someone in the street in a wealthy, western capital which country hosts the most number of refugees and few would give the correct answer: Iran.

Only a minority of people in richer countries realise they host a fraction of the world's displaced people when compared with less developed countries. But this has not stopped right-wing rhetoric against migrants and asylum-seekers seeping into the discourse in many of the elections being held globally this year.

Germany is the only western country to make the top ten list of countries hosting refugees, according to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data. Iran has the biggest number of refugees at more than 3.4 million and the other countries are Turkey, Pakistan, Uganda, Russia, Poland, Bangladesh, Sudan and Ethiopia.

But from the US to the UK, few politicians are willing to risk political capital by challenging anti-immigrant sentiment even though tough questions will be hard to ignore as more people are displaced around the world and countries face labour shortages amid falling birth rates.

Pushed by conflict in Syria, Afghanistan and Ukraine as well as climate change, the number of refugees worldwide increased from 27.1 million in 2021 to 36.4 million at mid-2023, says UNHCR.

Another 75.9 million people did not cross an international border but were forced to move within their own country as of the end of last year, a 50 per cent rise over the past five years, according to a **report** released last month by the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre (IDMC), part of the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC).

Some 7.7 million people were internally displaced by natural disasters and 68.3 million people by conflict and violence, with the wars in Sudan and Gaza accounting for much of increase, said the IDMC report.

"We have never, ever recorded so many people forced away from their homes and communities," said Jan Egeland, NRC secretary general. "It is a damning verdict on the failures of conflict prevention and peace-making."

These numbers are likely to rise dramatically, with more than 216 million people across six continents predicted to be on the move by 2050 largely due to climate change, **said** the UN's World Migration Report 2024 released last month.

Keeping foreigners out

But many countries are coming up with what human rights groups call ever more draconian and inventive ways to keep foreigners out, from sending them to poor African countries to sealing borders.

Furthermore, little distinction is made between asylum-seekers and people who migrate in search of a better life, as they have done throughout history.

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"Migration, an intrinsic part of human history, is often overshadowed by sensationalised narratives. However, the reality is far more nuanced than what captures headlines," said the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) last month.

"Most migration is regular, safe, and regionally focused, directly linked to opportunities and livelihoods. Yet, misinformation and politicisation have clouded public discourse, necessitating a clear and accurate portrayal of migration dynamics," it said.

US Border Policy

In developing countries, the money sent home by migrants has surpassed foreign direct

investment in boosting gross domestic product, said the UN migration report. International remittances rose by 650 per cent from \$128 billion in 2000 to \$831 billion in 2022, of which \$647 billion was sent to low and middle-income countries.

U.S. President Joe Biden, keeping a close eye on his rival Donald Trump, is expected soon to enact the most restrictive border policy of any modern Democrat and sign an executive order to seal the border with Mexico when illegal migrant crossings exceed 2,500 a day, meaning it could go into effect immediately barring legal challenges.

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Trump, meanwhile, has promised a return to the days of President Dwight D. Eisenhower in the 1950s when as many as 1.3 million mostly Mexican and Mexican-American workers were expelled.

Such talk comes when “there is a national worker shortage affecting the nation, and many states are feeling the impact,” **said** the U.S. Chamber of Commerce on 31 May.

A pawn in political debates

Furthermore, the number of international migrants as a share of the global population has stayed roughly the same at about 3 per cent for the past 60 years, according to academic studies. IOM estimates of the total number of international migrants at 281 million is in line with the overall rise in the global population.

But the tough talk grinds on. The opposition Labour party in the UK has promised to cut net migration while Nigel Farage, the arch Brexiteer, is pushing the panic button over foreigners in his bid for election as a member of parliament for the right-wing Reform party.



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Human rights groups fear a rise in already stark disparities in countries taking responsibility for refugees – they account for only 0.5 per cent of the population in the UK, which is a little better than Japan at 0.1 per cent but a far cry from Lebanon with 15 per cent.

Global population movements have “become a central item in the public debate in almost every country. It is determining the result of elections. It is having an impact on the very fabric of democracy,” **said** the UNHCR’s Filippo Grandi recently.

“It is most unfortunate, therefore, that people on the move have become such a pawn in political debates aimed mostly at gaining votes.”