

# REFUGEE/MIGRANT CRISIS IN EUROPE SITUATION ANALYSIS - March 2016

## SITUATION OVERVIEW

- + Sea arrivals to Greece averaged 12,800 per week in February, a reduction from 13,500 in January and 22,500 in December. Daily numbers fluctuated from a few to around 4,800. Bad weather and sea conditions are considered the main reasons for the reduction.
- + Increasing numbers of migrants are being prevented from crossing borders along the route and are stranded in the transit countries – a result of political measures taken by destination countries in agreement with transit countries, in order to stem migrant flow. The main impact is in Greece, where capacities to host migrants are already overstretched. All Balkan transit countries currently experience a 'reverse flow' with migrants being returned across borders. Humanitarian needs are varied as migrants are not only in transit, but also stuck along the route.
- + Covert smuggling is expected to increase as stranded migrants seek alternative ways to reach the destination countries following increased restrictions on transit via the official Balkan route.
- + Stemming the influx of migrants to Greece and tackling the smuggling issue are on the agenda of the 6 March Migration summit between Turkey and the EU. The last weeks of February saw an increase in arrivals on some Greek islands not previously serving as major arrival points, indicating that smugglers are adapting their strategies following clampdown measures by the Turkish authorities. It is not clear whether these measures have significantly reduced the number of migrants crossing the Aegean sea or put migrants waiting to cross at greater risk.
- + A direct train service from FYROM (Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) to Austria is planned to be operational in the next few days. Migrants would only be registered once throughout the journey, when boarding the train at the Greek-FYROM border. This uninterrupted transport could significantly improve the situation of those on board; however, there are concerns regarding the adequacy of services en route, based on current experiences with regional train transit.

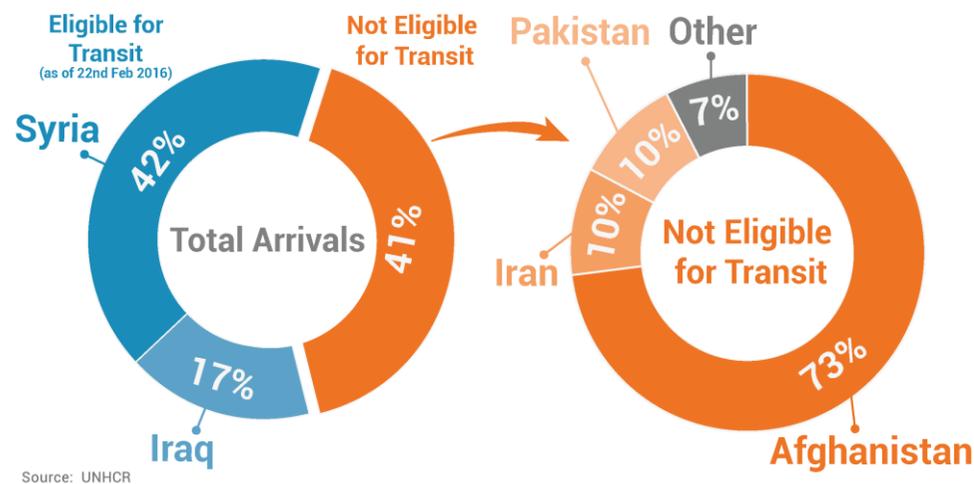
## KEY CONCERNS

**Stranded refugees** New restrictions introduced 21 February bar many asylum-seekers from transiting the Balkans and have put disproportional pressure on Greece. By 26 February, between 12,000 and 15,000 refugees were stuck in Greece and in need

of accommodation and services, after authorities in FYROM stopped allowing Afghans across the border and imposed stricter controls for Syrians and Iraqis: they now must present photo IDs to proceed. The new border restrictions were sparked by an Austrian government decision to impose a daily limit on migrants entering its territory, which resulted in changes in police procedures throughout the Balkans (OHCHR 25/02/2016; The Guardian 24/02/2016).

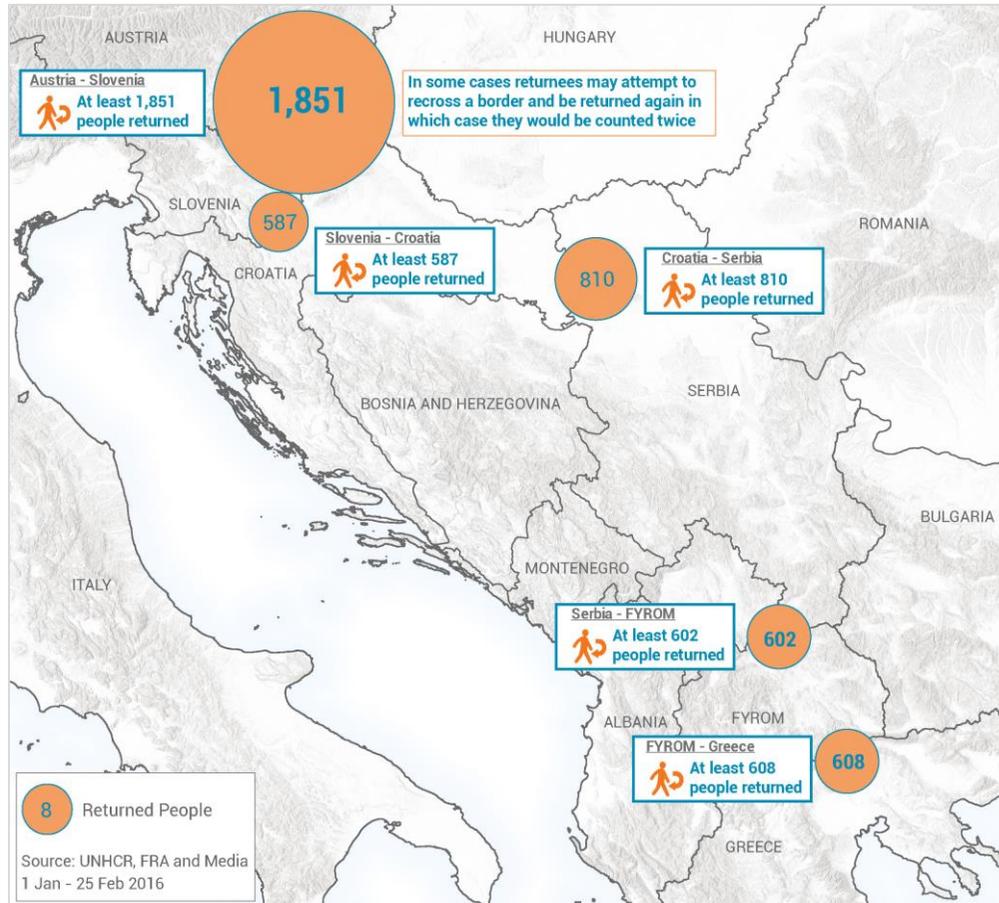
Current key concerns are the humanitarian needs of migrants stranded at borders and of those returned across borders along the Balkan route. Smuggling continues to pose protection risks to increasing numbers of migrants seeking alternative routes.

According to preliminary figures from UNHCR for February, 41% of migrants arriving in Greece are not eligible for Balkan transit. Of those not eligible, 73% are Afghan, which has created an acute shelter emergency in Greece (UNHCR, 26/02/2016).



All government-controlled transit centres on the mainland of Greece (Elaionas, Helleniko, Schisto, Diavata, Idomeni) are all now full beyond capacity and, while additional tents have been provided, hundreds of migrants are sleeping in the streets of Athens without protection or immediate assistance. The situation is accentuating pre-existing gaps in shelter, hygiene and sanitary provision. As the restrictions at the border with FYROM are unlikely to be relaxed and the rate of arrivals to Greece likely to increase, the number of people forced to remain in Greece indefinitely is expected to grow significantly over the coming months, especially as large-scale readmission to Turkey remains unlikely (Internews 26/02/2016).

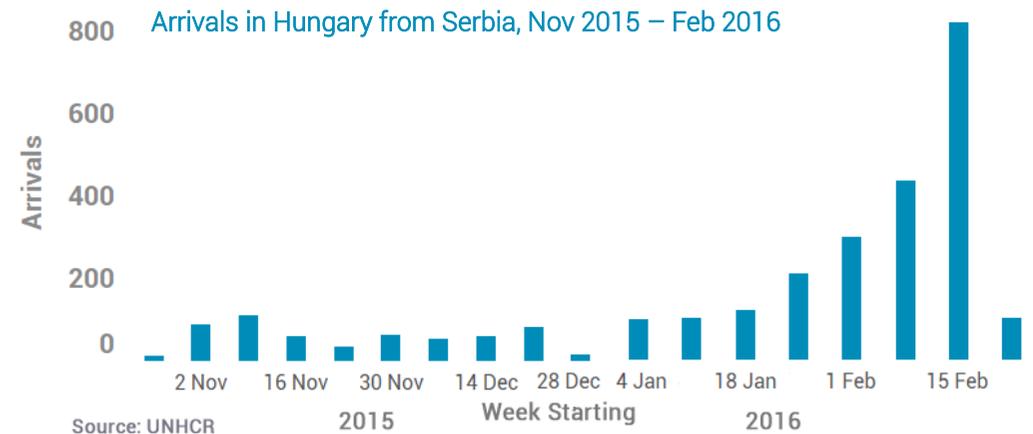
## Reverse flow



Following the change in border policies in Austria in mid-February, more migrants have been forcibly returned across Balkan borders (Internews 18/02/2016), including Syrians, Iraqis and Afghans (SIAs), whole families and unaccompanied minors. While transit countries have to date facilitated transit to prevent the need for long-term services to migrants, the recent returns from Austria to Slovenia have caused returns from Slovenia all the way back to Greece via Croatia, Serbia and FYROM; though not all are returned to the Greek border as many 'disappear' en route. An unknown number of migrants remain in the transit countries and are considered especially vulnerable as they lack official assistance. Although they have the possibility to ask for asylum, the number of asylum claims remains very low in all countries, and migrants are more likely to attempt to continue their journeys covertly using smugglers.

**Smuggling** Physical abuse and/or threat of abuse by smugglers has been reported at several points along the route. The numbers of migrants affected by such treatment is expected to rise as a consequence of stricter and selective entry procedures into transit and destination countries, and the possible clampdown on smuggling on the Turkish side. In Turkey and at the sea crossing to Greece, migrants stated they had been robbed and forced, at gunpoint, into overloaded boats (UNHCR 02/2016, REACH 01/2016). The EU and Turkey summit on 6 March is expected to result in a clampdown on smugglers in Turkey. The consequences of this are uncertain but could lead to more covert smuggling and higher prices; the latter possibly increasing illegal labour exploitation and sexual abuse by smugglers as migrants seek additional funds to pay for the journey. This would especially affect migrants from poorer economic backgrounds seeking to make the journey by boat.

As more and more migrants are ineligible for transit via the organised Balkan route, an increase in migrants travelling to Serbia via Bulgaria is expected. This route is used primarily by Afghans (to date, 70% of those transiting Bulgaria have been Afghan (Balkanroute 02/02/2016)), who are now prevented from entering FYROM. There have been recent indications that Afghan men have been returned to Bulgaria (Bordermonitoring Bulgaria, 23/02/2016). A rise in the number of migrants entering Hungary by cutting the border fence has also been observed in the past few weeks. Both developments are of concern, as transit through Bulgaria and Hungary has been perilous for migrants: they face arbitrary detention and are subject to violence by police, as well as abuse and robberies by smugglers (Euractiv 23/02/2016, HRW 01/2016). Injuries sustained by migrants include bites from police dogs and broken bones from beatings and rubber bullet wounds, all of which are exacerbated by the migrants' lack of access to health services.



**Coordinated Balkan transport** On 19 February, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and FYROM agreed to organise a direct transport corridor from FYROM to Austria with a single registration point at the Macedonian-Greek border (BalkanInsight 19/02/2016). This

coordinated transport could be a major improvement in transit conditions for migrants – but only if conditions on the trains are significantly improved: currently some trains are not cleaned, are unheated despite freezing temperatures, and have insufficient toilets because of overcrowding. The primary concerns are adequate access to food, hot water and beverages, medical services (including emergency treatment), and assafe spaces for women, children and infants during the non-stop 24-hour journey. Family separation, a current problem when groups are split during basdfoarding, will be a greater issue if families are split between trains.

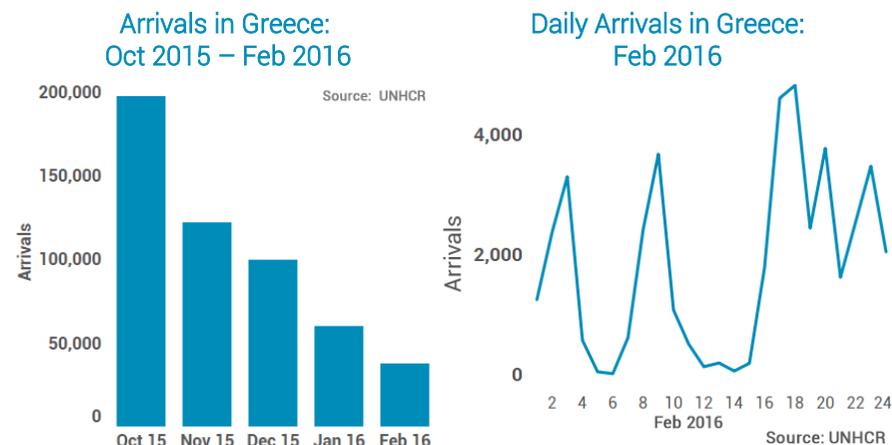
**Progress on hotspots** Following accelerated government efforts in early February, Greek island hotspots are officially operational on Lesbos, Leros, Chios, and Samos, while Kos remains non-functional due to strong local opposition. Each hotspot faces different challenges including staff shortages, lack of electricity, and insufficient accommodation capacity (Independent 19/02/2016). The hotspots allow for speedier registration, though the impact in terms of accommodation capacity, humanitarian access, and screening/detention of migrants remains unclear.

Humanitarian actors are concerned about whether the hotspots meet basic humanitarian standards. There is insufficient accommodation capacity in some hotspots to cope with the peaks in arrivals experienced in February, let alone the high numbers seen in 2015. The Leros hotspot, for example, has an official reception capacity of 330 (EC 24/02/2016), but has seen daily arrivals as high as 652 since opening, and a peak of 1,000 in 2015 (UNHCR 24/02/2016).

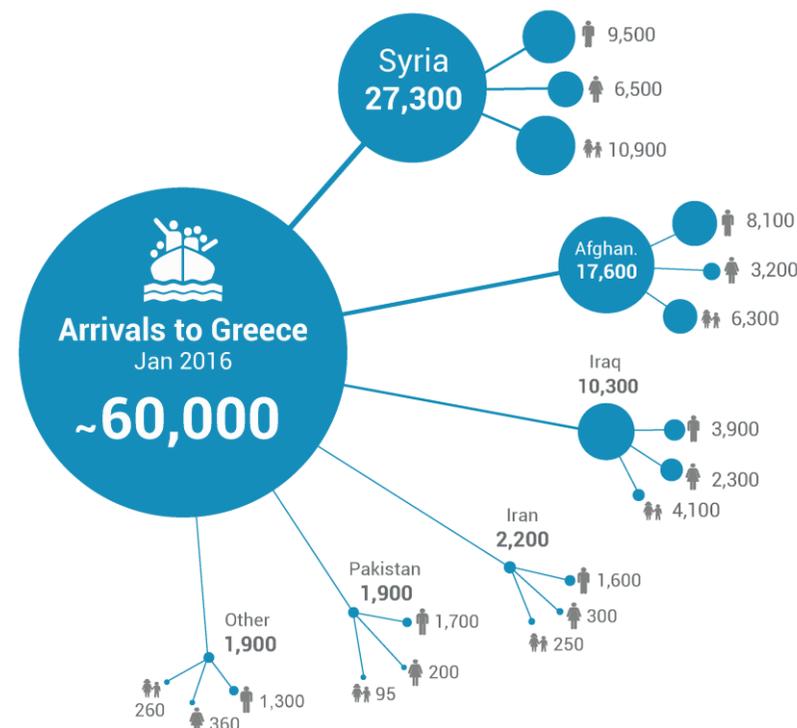
A draft Greek law authorising 3–25 days restriction on freedom of movement for new arrivals (ECRE 12/02/2016) has raised concerns that migrants' right to apply for international protection may be assessed, and for some nationalities denied, during this period. Furthermore, there is no clarity as to where those deemed ineligible for transit documents would be accommodated, where they would be sent, and under what conditions.

## TRENDS

+ The number of arrivals in Greece has slightly declined in February compared to the previous months, fluctuating from a few to 4,000 people per day with an average of around 1,830. The overall lower numbers are likely caused by the winter weather and consequent rough seas. The expected clampdown on smuggling activities along the Turkish coast and in the Aegean Sea is likely to reduce numbers further.



+ The disaggregation by nationality and gender for arrivals in Greece in January<sup>1</sup> reveals a larger proportion of women and children compared to men for the three nationalities constituting the largest groups of arrivals: Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis. 45% of the arrivals in January were Syrians, as shown below.



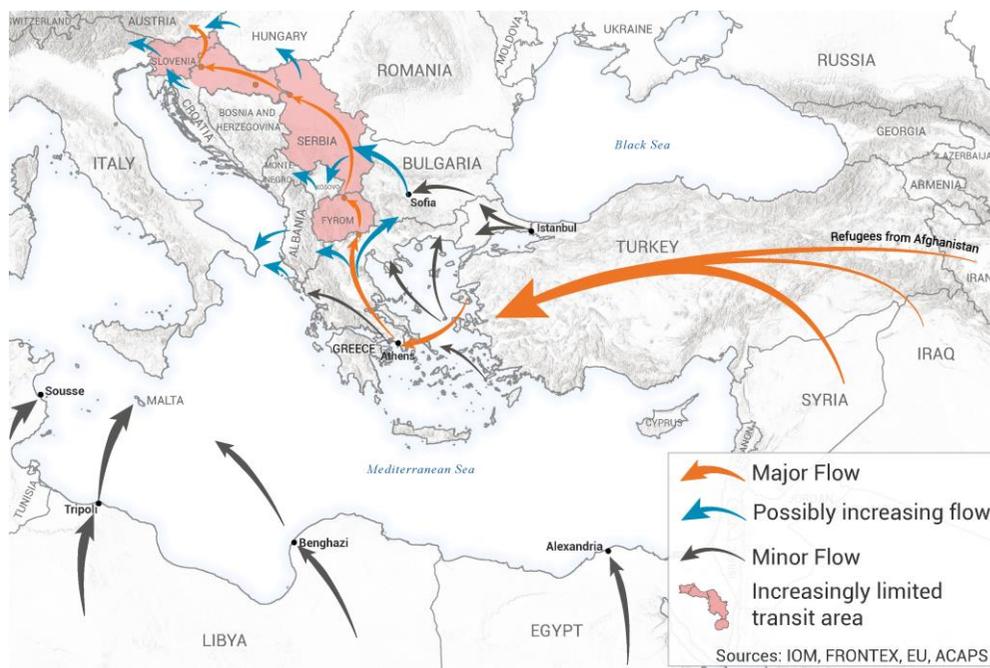
SOURCE: UNHCR, Hellenic Police/Hellenic Coast (as of 31 Jan).  
Note: sum of disaggregated figures might differ from total because of rounding effect.

<sup>1</sup> Profile data for February are not yet available

## POSSIBLE DEVELOPMENTS

- + **Relationship with host population:** Long-expressed fears of high numbers of people stranded at various points along the migration route have materialised in recent weeks, a situation likely to recur in the coming months and possibly for sustained periods. Host-community resentment and politicization of the crisis may build, fuelled by petty crimes committed by migrants. There may be an increase in protests against new accommodation facilities in Greece.
- + **Factors dispersing migrant population:** News of dire shelter conditions and the acute shelter shortage in Greece may lead to a significant reduction in new arrivals in the medium term, as some Afghans are likely to delay or cancel plans to cross from Turkey into Greece unless restrictions are lifted in the coming weeks. Turkey may fortify its currently token anti-smuggling efforts following further EU persuasion, severely limiting or even ending mass Aegean crossings. A continued partial crackdown on coastal smuggling routes will probably encourage the growth of currently less popular routes. The emergence of Kastellorizo island, whose population of 250 has recently hosted 1,000 migrants (*Die Welt* 20/02/2016), as a more popular destination for sea crossings evokes the possibility of migrant needs scattering over remoter locations.

### Possible migrant movement with further limited Balkan route



- + **Access to humanitarian services:** Barring mass forcible returns of Afghans stranded in Greece to Turkey, which may provoke violent resistance, most will likely continue their journeys illegally via Bulgaria and Albania. Their undocumented status in transit will place them out of aid organisations' reach, ending their access to services intended to ease their journeys and denying them most forms of legal protection and assistance. European states expect an increase in attempted illegal entries, and will therefore continue reinforcing multiple borders while expanding efforts to dismantle smuggler networks within Europe, as signalled by EUROPOL's recent establishment of a European Migrant Smuggling Centre.

## INFORMATION NEEDS

More information is needed regarding:

- + The emergence of new routes, the numbers of migrants using these routes and the conditions along the way.
- + Routes and conditions for those travelling in Greece from Athens to the border crossing with FYROM at Idomeni.
- + The actual implementation capacity for asylum laws for migrants wishing to seek asylum in a transit country.
- + Number of people stranded at borders, and returned across borders along the route, to enable provision of services to these migrants.
- + Screening criteria and their application, which determine who can continue their journey to destination countries.
- + Drivers of the migrant flow in Turkey and the humanitarian conditions of those migrants intending to make the journey to Europe.
- + The setup and functioning of smuggling activities in Turkey.

**About this report:** This report is the fourth situation analysis on the refugee/migrant crisis in Europe published by ACAPS and MapAction and funded by the Start Network. Provision of regular comparative analysis of the situation in these countries will inform both strategic and immediate operational decision-making. The analysis is based on a review of secondary data and discussions with key informants from (I)NGOs, UN agencies and Governments. ACAPS and MapAction would like to thank all organisations that support the project. For additional information, requests for support, or questions, please e-mail: [analysis@acaps.org](mailto:analysis@acaps.org)

