Refugee crisis could worsen in New Year unless its addressed

Refugees wait on August 18, 2015 in front of a building of the reception centre in Trier, Germany. PHOTO | DPA | HARALD TITTEL | AFP

As the world celebrates Christmas, Germans are also remembering the dead from last year's attack on a Berlin Christmas market by a migrant who had been denied asylum.

That incident fanned the flames of public sentiment against immigration, and probably played a role in Chancellor Angela Merkel's stunning failure to form a new a coalition government after the federal election in September. Within the German electorate, there are widespread fears that another wave of migrants like the influx two years ago will deluge the country.

But the facts on the ground have changed dramatically. On November 15, 2015, a migration command centre in the German Foreign Ministry on Werderscher Markt in Berlin was tracking refugee flows at every potential border crossing on the route from Greece to Germany. Eventually, of 12 million displaced Syrians, one million arrived in Europe.

ASYLUM SEEKERS

And despite a massive response from the German government and members of the public, many asylum-seekers ended up sleeping on the streets and in railway stations. At the time, there were rumours of a migrant-fueled crime wave sweeping the country, though later research found little increase in crime along migration routes.

Two years later, much has changed. The German bureaucratic engine has been firing on all cylinders to process asylum claims and facilitate integration. Of 700,000 asylum applications in 2016, almost 300,000 were denied, and those people are waiting to be returned to their countries of origin. Greece, the first stop in the European Union for refugees from the Middle East, has started to

close some refugee camps, after granting asylum to around 50,000 people. And even Italy, the first EU port of call for African migrants, is now experiencing a decline in asylum applications.

FINANCIAL AID

Turkey, meanwhile, has stuck to its deal with the EU, whereby it receives financial aid in exchange for taking in Syrian refugees. Before the deal entered into effect in March 2016, Turkey's government had been actively encouraging migrants and refugees to continue to Europe; now, it is integrating refugees into Turkish society, and even trying to prevent high-skilled migrants from leaving. Accordingly, the European Commission announced this month that it would provide another €700 million ($830 million) in aid to Turkey.

Against this backdrop of relatively improved conditions, Lebanon stands out as an exception. Although Lebanon has a population of just four million people, it is now host to more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees. The result is a growing sense of refugee fatigue, which is threatening to destabilise the country's fragile multi-confessional power-sharing arrangement.

As for the refugees themselves, many are visible in the streets of Beirut, the capital, but most are stuck in camps or temporary host communities, and lack adequate access to health care and schooling.

EMPLOYMENT

And even when refugees are accommodated by schools and universities, they have limited employment prospects after graduating. Another lost generation is coming of age in a country that has long been riven by bungled integration efforts. Making matters worse, following the resignation and return of Prime Minister Saad Hariri, Lebanon is now experiencing a political crisis that has raised the specter of a return to civil war.

The refugee crisis is fundamentally a systemic challenge, because developments in one country can affect many other countries. As such, the crisis demands an EU-level and, indeed, a global response. Fortunately, for the first time since Syria's civil war began, there is hope that the EU might muster an effective joint approach to the problem. In a wide-ranging speech at the Sorbonne in September, French President Emmanuel Macron injected new energy into EU policy-making

in this area. And, inspired by the Jordanian model, EU policymakers can now begin to develop a more coherent, evidence-based migration policy.

Of course, much will depend on Germany. One hopes that its leaders will not let whipped-up sentiments about migration torpedo a coalition agreement.

They must recognize that German leadership in the EU and on the world stage is crucial for managing the migration challenge, not least in Germany itself.

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