

# Winter is coming : the new crisis for refugees in Europe

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Record numbers of migrants and refugees crossed the Mediterranean to Europe in October – just in time for the advent of winter, which is already threatening to expose thousands to harsh conditions.

The latest UN figures, which showed 218,000 made the perilous Mediterranean crossing last month, confirm fears that the end of Summer has not stemmed the flow of refugees as has been the pattern in previous years, partly because of the sheer desperation of those fleeing an escalating war in Syria and other conflicts.

The huge numbers of people arriving at the same time as winter is raising fears of a new humanitarian crisis within Europe's borders. Cold weather is coming to Europe at greater speed than its leadership's ability to make critical decisions. A summit of EU and Balkan states last week agreed some measures for extra policing and shelter for 100,000 people. But an estimated 700,000 refugees and migrants, have arrived in Europe this year along unofficial and dangerous land and sea routes, from Syria, Eritrea, Afghanistan, Iraq, north Africa and beyond. Tens of thousands, including the very young and the very old, find themselves trapped in the open as the skies darken and the first night frosts take hold. Hypothermia, pneumonia and opportunistic diseases are the main threats now, along with the growing desperation of refugees trying to save the lives of their families. Fights have broken out over blankets, and on occasion between different national groups. Now sex traffickers are following the columns of refugees, picking off young unaccompanied stragglers.

The United Nations refugee agency, UNHCR, is distributing outdoor survival packages, including sleeping bags, blankets, raincoats, socks, clothes and shoes, but the number of people it can reach is limited by its funding, which has so far been severely inadequate. Volunteer agencies have tried to fill the gaping hole in humanitarian provisions in Europe. Peter Bouckaert, the director of emergencies for Human Rights Watch, said that all the way along the route into Europe through the Balkans “there is virtually no humanitarian response from European institutions, and those in need rely on the good will of volunteers for shelter, food, clothes, and medical assistance.”

Europe has found itself ill-prepared to deal with its biggest influx of refugees since the second world war. It is hurriedly improvising new mechanisms so that it can respond collectively as a continent rather than individual nations, but it is a race against time and the elements – a race Europe is not guaranteed to win.

“There is a risk of collapse,” said Federica Mogherini, the EU foreign policy chief.

“Because when you're facing a challenge and you don't have the instruments to do it, you risk failing. So it could be that if we don't manage to create common instruments to deal with this on a European level, we fall back on the illusion that we can face it through national instruments, which we see very clearly doesn't work.

Mogherini added: “Either we take this big step and adapt ... or yes, we do have a major crisis. I would say even an identity crisis.”

(540 words)