



## **Migration: A look at challenges and myths**

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By 2015, the civil war in Syria was already in its fourth year, having displaced half of its population of 22 million, who poured into neighbouring countries of Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan.

But it was the spectre of millions of Syrians pouring into Europe which touched off a political firestorm.

That year, one million migrants from Syria and other countries filed claims for refugee status while in the European Union. In 2016, the number swelled to 1.3 million.

While the number of such claims has since dropped significantly, the aftershock lingers.

The result is that far-right populist parties are expected to do well in the EU elections, which wrapped up yesterday. This follows inroads by such parties at national elections in countries like Finland, Italy and Hungary since 2016.

Analysts say the sudden and seemingly uncontrolled influx of refugees influenced how people voted in the Brexit referendum in 2016 and the United States presidential election the same year.

The response has been to limit migration and redouble efforts to integrate migrants, protect domestic labour markets and improve security, in order to avoid a backlash from extremist groups.

But this is fraught, potentially choking off the supply of labour and skills for ageing populations in Europe. It may also be unnecessary, as statistics show that new arrivals tend to be involved in fewer crimes than native-born citizens.

Migrants after disembarking from a rescue boat in Malaga, Spain. Of late, the number of refugee claimants in Europe is down by more than half from 2016 levels. Statistics suggest that even then, the population did not swell with the arrival of refugees. The European Union accepted 1.3 million refugees, the equivalent of 0.26 per cent of its population, in 2016.

The themes and topics in the primer pieces are part of the outreach by The Straits Times-Ministry of Education National Current Affairs Quiz, or The Big Quiz, which aims to promote an understanding of local and global issues among pre-university students.

The primers will broach contemporary issues, such as the impact of artificial intelligence on jobs and the workplace, and how fast fashion is affecting the environment. They also include the issue of fake news and the legislation against misinformation and disinformation, and an examination of why national borders are still important in today's globalised world.

For the second year, The Big Quiz will be online, allowing pre-university students to take part in the current affairs competition over three quiz rounds, the first of which began on April 15.

The final round will start on July 29.

The primer pieces have been running on Mondays since April 1, and except for a break during the mid-year school holidays, will continue until Aug 5. This nationwide event is jointly organised by The Straits Times and the Ministry of Education.

The vast majority of migration occurs within countries. A report in 2009 by the United Nations Development Programme said 740 million moved within their own countries. That compares with 244 million moving between countries, according to the UN. As a percentage of the world's population, these figures suggest most people stay put.

The problem is that migration volumes are growing much faster than expected, owing to globalisation, civil strife, environmental and economic collapse, and other reasons.

In 2003, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) predicted that by 2050, about 230 million people would move each year to another country. The IOM has since doubled its forecast to 420 million.

Violent extremism in the Middle East, blamed on the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, and ethnic cleansing by authoritarian regimes explain the sudden surge. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in June last year said a record 68.5 million were forced from their homes to flee conflict and persecution - at a rate of more than 30 people every minute. In 2011, UNHCR put refugee numbers at 15 million.

Most people emigrate for more mundane reasons - to reunite with relatives, for example.

But the prospect of increasingly frequent surges in the volume of refugees and other migrants has some countries reducing or capping the number of foreigners they will accept.

Australia is capping at 190,000 the number of migrants it will accept each year, down from 208,000 in 2017.

The administration of US President Donald Trump has also cut the number of refugees the country will accept to 30,000 - down from 45,000 last year.

The US will also reduce the number of migrants it accepts who want to reunite with family members, and abolish the lottery for work permits and country quotas. It is also planning to recalibrate its immigration policy around a points system that assesses a candidate's English proficiency and skills. Proponents of a points system argue that it is more meritocratic. Australia, for one, uses a points system.

According to media reports, the aim of the US proposal is to seek highly qualified migrants, including doctors and engineers who speak English and have little difficulty fitting in.

The current plan is premised on the notion that migrants are a drain on resources and a security risk.

President Trump has even called asylum seekers from Central America "animals".

But in the wake of Brexit, a Citigroup report last year said that if the United Kingdom had frozen migration in 1990, the country's gross domestic product in 2014 would have been £175 billion (\$306 billion) lower.

In Australia, a report by the country's Treasury department found that migration adds 0.15 percentage points to GDP each year.

Mr Trump asserts that migrants, particularly undocumented ones trying to slip across the US' southern border with Mexico, make the country less safe. As well as arguing for a wall to be built along the border, he has stationed 3,700 soldiers to stem the influx of migrants.

But a report by the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank, said undocumented workers were charged with fewer crimes than native-born Americans. In Texas, a US state next to Mexico, they were charged at half the rate of locals.

Even so, migration remains a hot-button topic. President Trump campaigned almost exclusively on it at the country's midterm elections. The centre-right Liberal Party in Australia, which takes a hard line on immigration, unexpectedly won re-election.

For now, the number of refugee claimants in Europe is down by more than half from 2016 levels.

Even at its height, the numbers suggest the population of rich countries did not swell with the arrival of refugees.

The US cap on immigration represents 0.001 per cent of its population. At 1.3 million refugees, the EU, comprising some of the world's richest countries, accepted the equivalent of 0.26 per cent of its population in 2016.

By contrast, Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan are home to most of the displaced from the Syrian conflict.

Lebanon, a country with a population of six million, is now home to 1.3 million Syrian refugees.