



THE WORLD OF REFUGEES

Introduction - Problems of definition

A number of the lead items reported in the media in recent years have been about sizeable movements of people, such as those listed in *Table 1*.

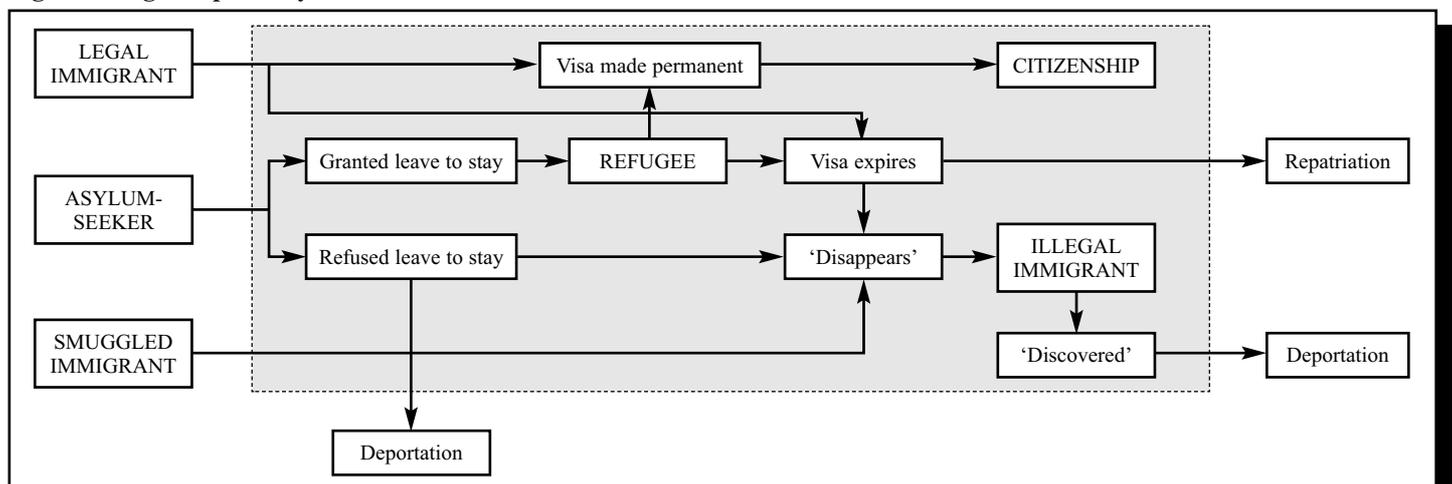
Table 1 Examples of recent population movements.

- *Afghans trying to enter Pakistan in order to escape the Taliban*
- *Terrified families fleeing from ethnic cleansing in former Yugoslavia*
- *White citizens driven from their farms and out of Zimbabwe by a corrupt political regime desperately clinging to power*
- *Residents abandoning their homes as volcanic lava engulfs the Congolese town of Goma and making for neighbouring Rwanda*
- *Starving masses moving out from the African Sahel in search of food*
- *People risking life and limb to hitch an illegal lift across the English Channel on Eurostar or container lorries.*

In reporting such events, two terms are regularly used - **refugee** and **asylum-seeker**. They are often used inaccurately. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) reserves the term **refugee** only for those people who are driven out of a country by 'a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion'. So the first three of the six examples in *Table 1* would qualify as refugee movements. However, the UN definition does not appear to include those people uprooted by natural disasters, as in the fourth and fifth examples. Presumably they are not included as refugees because most often they will return to their homelands once the disaster and its effects have passed.

Anyone escaping from persecution, or for that matter from a natural disaster, only becomes a refugee when their search for safety takes them across a national frontier and into another state. Many refugees eventually become citizens of the country that has offered them sanctuary (*Fig. 1*). Uprooted people who remain within their original national borders are generally referred to as **displaced people**.

Fig. 1 Immigrant pathways.



A term increasingly used these days is **asylum-seeker** (*Fig. 1*). This refers to anyone who is seeking to enter a country on the grounds that they have been driven out of another. Many asylum-seekers are genuine refugees and for this reason will be granted 'leave to stay'. However, the ranks of asylum-seekers also contain rising numbers of migrants who are driven by unemployment and poverty or the wish to join friends and relatives. Rather than following the normal legal immigrant pathway, many believe that they have a better chance of getting into a country if they pose as victims of persecution. Such people are often referred as **economic refugees** or **economic migrants**. In most cases, they are refused 'leave to stay' and are subsequently deported. However, some will 'disappear' before they can be deported and so join the ranks of **illegal immigrants**. Sorting out the genuine refugee from the mass of asylum seekers is one of a number of thorny issues facing those countries, such as the UK, that are popular refugee destinations.

Table 2 Key definitions.

Term	Definition
Asylum-seekers	People who seek to gain entry to another country by claiming to be victims of persecution, hardship or some other compelling circumstance.
Refugees	People whose reasons for moving are genuinely to do with fear of persecution or death.
Displaced people	Those forced to leave their homes and seek refuge elsewhere within the country.
Economic refugees	Migrant workers who falsely claim that their reasons for migrating are to do with persecution rather than personal ambition.
Illegal immigrants	People who take up residence in a foreign country without official permission to do so.

Fig. 1 draws attention to two other pathways into a country: the legal and the illegal. With the former, entry to another country is made before leaving and relies on the issuing of either a temporary or a permanent visa. As regards the latter, all that is necessary here is to mention the growing tide of people who pay huge sums of money to be literally smuggled into a country, often in very harrowing circumstances (leaky boats or baggage compartments of lorries).

More push than pull?

Migration is typically seen as a response to two sets of forces.

- **Push forces** are pressures that persuade a person to move abroad.
- **Pull forces** are those that attract a migrant to a particular destination.

With refugees, quite clearly push forces are uppermost, since all refugee movements are initiated by some threat (perceived or real) in the home country. Table 3 illustrates some possible triggers.

Table 3 Push and pull forces in refugee movements.

Push forces	Pull forces
Natural disasters - e.g. floods, drought, volcanic eruptions, earthquake, etc.	Safety; emergency aid; refugee camps
Famine	Feeding stations; food surpluses
War	Neutrality; peace
Epidemics	Immunisation programmes; healthcare
Persecution - race, religion, political views, etc.	Human rights respected; tolerance; people of similar ethnicity; language

There is much to note under the heading of natural disasters, ranging from floods to droughts, from earthquakes to volcanic eruptions. On the pull side, much hangs on government attitudes in potential 'receiver' countries. In some, refugees will be welcomed; in others entry will be difficult. It has to be said that the latter is the more common situation. Few governments today are willing to open their frontiers to a large influx of refugees. The reasons should become clearer when the impacts of refugee movements are considered.

Sources and Destinations

Nearly half of all the world's refugees come from Asian countries, and a quarter from Africa (Fig. 2). Many parts of Africa today are suffering from a potent mix of push forces, involving food shortages, tribal conflicts, disease and political corruption and war. However, the majority of these refugees do not move between global regions. They simply move into neighbouring countries. The situation is rather different with Asian refugees, many of whom head for Australia, Europe or North America. Remember too that some of those seeking asylum in Europe in fact come from within the continent, most notably from former Yugoslavia and the former Communist states of Eastern Europe.

When it comes to European destinations, Germany and the UK seem to be the most popular refugee choices (Fig. 2). Between 1990 and 2000, Germany received just under 2 million asylum applications, with the UK a long way back in second place with half that number. For much of the decade, the attraction of Germany lay in its job opportunities, but the situation now is dramatically different.

The UK is a magnet because of:

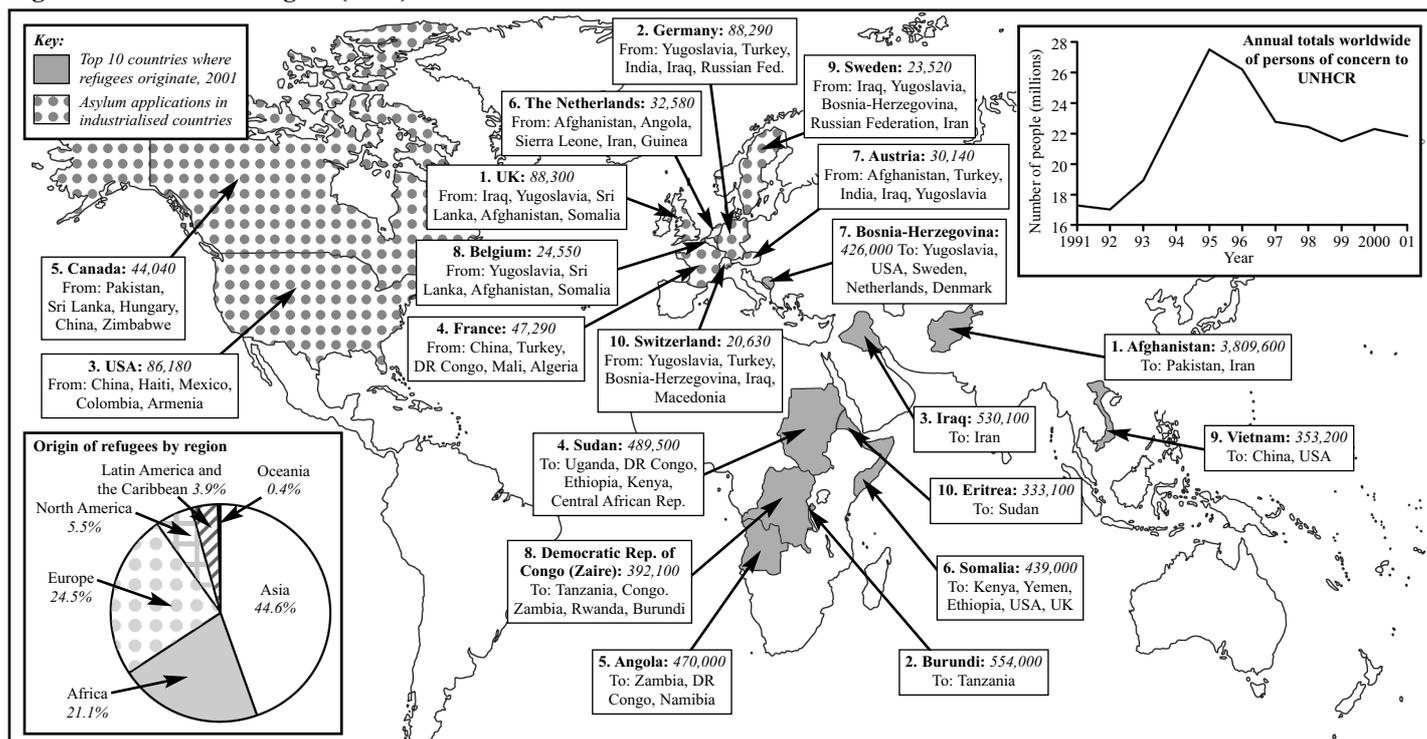
- former colonial links dating from the 19th and 20th centuries
- the perception that the UK is a country that treats refugees generously
- a low deportation rate
- the ease with which it is possible to 'disappear' in British society (Fig. 1) in a country with no identity cards.

Looking back, it would seem from the graph in Fig. 2 that the 1990s could be called the 'decade of the refugee'. Numbers peaked in 1995 at nearly 28 million. Currently, the situation seems to have 'plateau-ed' at around the 22 million mark.

Case Study 1: The Kurds – a nation of refugees

- The traditional homeland of the Kurds straddles the mountainous area where the borders of four nations (Iran, Iraq, Syria and Turkey) converge. Kurds in this region number between 20 and 30 million, but they have never been allowed to establish an independent state. Indeed, they have suffered much persecution.
- Around half the Kurds live in Turkey where for long they have even been denied the right to speak and publish in their own language. Up to a million of them have been displaced from their homelands on the pretext that the areas were needed for security reasons or for dam construction.
- In Iraq more than a million Kurds have fled in fear of annihilation by Saddam Hussein. The current post-Gulf War 'no fly zone' imposed by the USA and its allies represents an attempt to protect the Kurds in the northern part of the country.
- The numbers involved in the Kurdish situation dwarf the 4 million Palestinians that UNRWA currently recognises as refugees.

Fig. 2 The world of refugees (2001).



Case Study 2: Refugee fall-out from the break-up of Yugoslavia

The disintegration of the Communist state of Yugoslavia during the 1990s created some 4 million refugees and displaced people. It made a significant contribution to 'the decade of the refugee' (see Fig. 2, page 2).

- In 1999 a million Albanians fled from Kosovo during the Serbian regime of **ethnic cleansing**.
- In the following year, the flow was reversed and thousands of Serbs were driven out of Kosovo to seek refuge in what was left of Yugoslavia.
- The population of Croatia is now over 80 per cent Croat; its Serb population (once accounting for 11 per cent) is now largely gone.
- Whilst some of the Muslims who fled Bosnia have returned, many remain elsewhere fearful of persecution by Bosnian Serbs and Croats. Insecurity and displacement are still very much the facts of life for the 27 million inhabitants of the former Yugoslavia.

More good than bad?

There is no doubt that refugee movements have both positive and negative outcomes. For the individual, the benefits are escape from the pressures that caused them to move in the first place. But think of the costs, such as the loss of a home, losing contact with family and friends, and adjusting to a new way of life in an often very alien country. At a national level, there is a similar situation of costs and benefits at both ends of the refugee journey (see Table 4).

Table 4 Some positive and negative outcomes of refugee movements.

Positive	Negative
Country of departure (source)	
Reduction of problems perceived as being caused by would-be refugees Refugees send money back to relatives	Loss of human resources Localities and communities drawn into a vicious circle of decline Growth of emigration culture Dependence on remittances Illegal trafficking in people
Country of arrival (host)	
Enrichment of human resources Cultural diversification Unwanted jobs filled by refugees	Pressure on food supplies, housing and services Congestion, particularly in camps & cities Discrimination against refugees Spread of disease Illegal trafficking in people

The migration pathway of the individual refugee might be seen as involving **four** steps:

1. Deciding to move (presumably to a particular country).
2. Moving across intervening countries.
3. Applying for refugee status and leave to stay.
4. Settling in or being sent back as a 'reject'. This usually happens if the political situation in the applicants' homeland has improved.

Once the first step has been taken, each of the next three poses particular problems that presumably add to the 'bad' side of the migration equation (Tables 4 & 5).

Table 5 Problems and issues along the refugee pathway.

<p>A Problems and issues in transit</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Securing safe transport to chosen destination • Should those passing through to another country be subject to any screening? • What provision should be made for them during their transit to the preferred destination country? • Should they be 'herded' into special camps? • Should any transit across a country have a tight time limit?
<p>B Problems and issues on entry</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emergency nature of situation • Sorting out the bona fide from the opportunist • Recognising human rights (including freedom of movement) • Speed of processing applications • Providing accommodation whilst application is being processed - concentrate or disperse? • Health screening • Ensuring that asylum-seeker does not 'disappear' to become an illegal immigrant • Clamping down on migration crime and illegal immigration • Repatriating those refused entry
<p>C Problems and issues after acceptance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where to locate? • How to accommodate? • Level of support needed? • How to integrate?

A Problems and issues in transit

Clearly, finding a mode of transport is the first challenge. Since the bulk of refugees have to take the cheapest option, travel will be overland and often involve crossing countries in order to reach the preferred destination.

Case study 3: Sangatte and all that

Sangatte is a camp set up in northern France by the Red Cross close to the entrance to the Channel Tunnel. It accommodates some 1200 people wishing to enter the UK but who for various reasons have yet to do just that.

Whilst undoubtedly the circumstances of some of the inmates make them genuine refugees, there are many others who fall in the economic refugee category. Many in the latter category have already been turned away by British immigration officials. Their intention now is to try to enter the country illegally, usually by trying to smuggle themselves on either Eurostar trains or lorries using the conventional ferry services.

Heavy fines are now imposed on any operator found to be carrying illegal immigrants, whether knowingly or unknowingly. The transport operators, as well as the British government, complain that the French police and other officials should be doing much more to discourage the 'hitchhikers'.

It now looks as if, as result of British pressure, the camp might be closed altogether. However the situation at Sangatte and at many other refugee holding centres in other parts of the world highlights a range of issues (see Table 5). Update: November 2002 – Sangatte has now officially been closed, but the problem remains.

B Problems and issues on entry

Probably the greatest problem for refugees is that a formal application has to be made to the 'receiver' government for refugee status and 'leave to stay'. It takes time to distinguish between the genuine refugee (i.e. those who are really threatened) and those who are doing it as a way of getting around what are normally tight immigration controls (e.g. the economic refugee).

The trouble is that the checking out takes time and quite often emergency situations generate sudden influxes of large numbers of asylum seekers. Table 6 shows large backlogs in processing the huge numbers wishing to enter some European countries.

What should happen to asylum-seekers whilst their applications are being processed? Should they be held in special centres such as have recently been suggested by the UK Government or dispersed into areas with vacant housing, and what sort of benefits should be given?

One issue that straddles the steps of transit and entry is that of illegal trafficking in migrants. In a scenario where people are desperate to move, particularly to countries that are favourably perceived (Table 6) but have fairly tough entry requirements, asylum-seekers become easy targets for unscrupulous criminals.

Table 6 Asylum-seeking in selected European countries (2001).

	France	Germany	Italy	UK
Applications	47,290	88,290	14,000	88,300
Awaiting decision	15,000	122,000	8,000	74,000
Main countries of origin	China, Turkey, former African colonies	Yugoslavia, Iraq, Turkey, Russia	Morocco, Albania, Yugoslavia, Tunisia	Iraq, Yugoslavia, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan
Accepted	13%	12%	7%	29%
Where held	Mainly in hostels	In assigned houses	In detention centres	Mainly dispersed but some in detention centres
Benefits	£200 per month	Vouchers worth £137 per month	Free access to social services	Vouchers; health care & education
Other attractions	Few failed asylum-seekers leave	Very sympathetic consideration	2-yr residence permit granted to all	Few who fail are removed

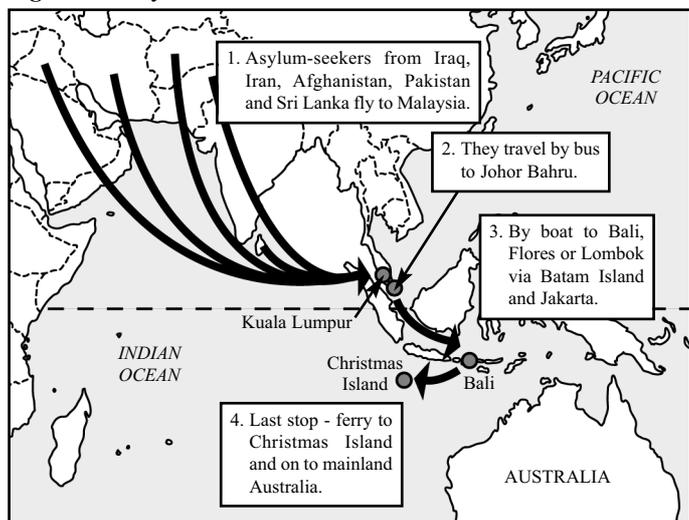
Case study 4: Smuggling people on the Tampa freighter.

In September, 2001, the freighter Tampa hit the world headlines. By refusing to allow its 'cargo' of 460 'asylum-seekers' to disembark, the Australian government immediately became the target of worldwide criticism. The dilemma facing the Government soon became clear:

During the second half of the 20th century, Australia had welcomed a steadily rising influx of immigrants. The country benefited greatly from this enrichment of its human resources. However, more recently that welcome has created a backlash in the form of a great tidal-wave of asylum-seekers trying to enter Australia.

The problem for any government is this. If immigrants are to be treated humanely and helped to settle in their new surroundings, then the whole process of immigration needs to be sensitively managed. This may well mean controlling the rate at which people are admitted into the country. Failure to do this can set in train a whole run of undesirable outcomes. Hostility arises in the host community because of fears of being overrun by migrants. Hostility leads to discrimination. The migrants themselves suffer deprivation and experience feelings of increasing alienation.

Fig. 3 The asylum-seekers' route to Australia.



However, applying the brakes to immigration, particularly when the destination happens to be a popular one, can all too easily create a situation that the people-smugglers are quick to exploit. This is what is happening in Australia, as indeed in Asia and Europe.

Those passengers on the Tampa, mainly from Iraq and Afghanistan, had all paid good money to some underworld operator to get them to Australia (Fig. 3). Like many thousands before them and since, they gathered on one of the Indonesian islands and awaited a boat (often un-seaworthy) to make the perilous 36-hour crossing to Christmas Island, the nearest point of Australia.

On landing, by claiming to be asylum-seekers, they gain temporary entry. It is during the time it takes for officials to process asylum applications (often a lengthy business) that frequently such seekers 'disappear' (Fig. 1, page 1). Perhaps armed with forged documents and willing to work in the black economy, the smuggled illegal immigrants can settle in undetected.

The bottom line to this case study is provided by a statement, made at the time of the Tampa incident, by Australia's Immigration Minister:

"If these people (on board) were to be allowed to enter Australia now, it would be seen as a sign for all (asylum-seekers) to continue coming in this way."

As it turned out, the Tampa people were eventually allowed to land and so far as is known, most were granted visas to stay. But not before spending as much as two years in a detention centre for refugees, such as at Woomera in South Australia or at Curtin in NW Australia, literally cut off miles from anywhere. But one has to agree with that same minister when he said:

"There needs to be a better international effort to reduce the level of people-smuggling. There has to be a more combined international effort involving the United Nations."

The last point in the case study is picked up again at the end of this article.

C Problems and issues after acceptance

The sorts of questions posed in *Table 5 (Section C)* suggest that a successful resettlement of refugees in their new country hinges on four key actions - adjustment, compassion, understanding and integration. Refugees need to be willing to adjust to the ways of the host country. The case study below provides some illustration of the challenges here. Try to identify the specific issues. Equally, the people of the host country need to show compassion and to understand that refugees are not bad news. There needs to be a changing of mind sets. Refugees may be people who need help in the short-term, but in the long-term they have much to offer. If these three actions of adjustment, compassion and understanding are fulfilled, then there is a real prospect of integration and an enriched society.

Case study 5: The view of Maja Jovanovsky, a 13-year old Croatian refugee

"When I came to London it was a real shock. I came from a small place. I had no idea where I was or who I was.

There were lots of problems in my country and we needed to get away. It still hurts when I think about it and sometimes I cry when I remember. But now we have all started a new life and don't like to talk about the past. We have permanent leave to stay here.

When we first got out, my father didn't come with us. Those were some of my worst moments because I missed my dad a lot and worried about him. Now he is here and I'm much happier. We live in a small apartment. It's nice but a bit small. My little brothers and sister share one room and my room is very small..... we are on a waiting list for somewhere bigger.

When I was there (in Croatia) I had English lessons. I'm a quick learner and haven't found it too difficult to learn the language now that I'm in England. My parents are trying to learn English now. They go to the job centre, but it is difficult to find a job if you don't speak good English. I help them at home. My mum usually asks me to translate and help her write letters and fill in forms. I have a lot of support from my teachers at school, and I want to go to university and make a future for myself.

I think England is a good place to live. There is a future for me here I can be whatever I want to be here, and that wasn't possible in Croatia."

The way ahead

The final point made in the Australian case study about international cooperation applies not only to people smuggling. It is needed to deal with many of the issues raised by asylum-seeker movements. For example, the European Commission is just beginning to make some moves to deal with them. Proposals being considered by the 15 member states include:

- achieving a more equitable 'sharing out' of all the refugees converging on the EU, particularly in emergency situations
- stopping member states, such as France, from encouraging asylum-seekers to move on to other EU countries so that they become someone else's problem
- insisting that all unsuccessful asylum-seekers should return to the country through which they first entered the EU
- ensuring that unsuccessful asylum-seekers are deported rather than allowed to 'disappear' into the host communities
- agreeing that the same minimum standards of treatment and protection should be extended to all asylum-seekers
- adopting common procedures for processing asylum applications
- insisting that all asylum-seekers should carry identity cards with photos and finger-prints
- combating illegal immigration and human trafficking by organised crime.

A vital question here is the extent to which some of these intended actions conflict with the 'freedom of movement' promised to every global citizen in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). Many say that any solution of the refugee problem needs to involve both the 'supplier' and the 'receiver' countries, not just cooperation between the latter. Dialogue between both ends of the migration pathway is likely to lessen both the pains suffered by refugees and the opportunities for the global criminal class.

Exam Hints:

A topic such as the refugee problem requires a balanced evaluation, supported by appropriate case studies.

- *It will almost certainly appear as an A2 essay-style question so you will need to look at causes, impacts, issues, costs and benefits as you would in any other international migration question.*
- *Do be aware of bias of sources. The further research list does contain a variety of websites and sources. You can also keep up to data by collecting newspaper cuttings, which tend to be anti-refugees – often concentrating on issues of NIMBY (for a refugee camp) and the social security scrounger issue.*

Further research

Boyle, P. et al. (1998) *Exploring Contemporary Migration* (Chapter 8). Longman.

Stalker, P. (2001) *The No-nonsense Guide to International Migration*. New International Publications.

Millions of Migrants, *Understanding Global Issues*, 110 (2002)

New Internationalist, October 2002. Special issue on refugees.

The Economist Special Supplement on Migration. Nov 2 – 8th 2002.

Useful web-sites

<http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk>

<http://www.spareroomsforrefugees.com>

<http://www.statistics.gov.uk>

<http://www.unhcr.ch>

Acknowledgements

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