THE SYRIA CRISIS IS NOT A TEMPORARY PHENOMENON

The flood of refugees into Europe from the Middle East and Africa has only just begun as states disintegrate in a maelstrom of religious war, the United Nations has warned.

"We cannot comfort ourselves that this is a temporary phenomenon," said Peter Sutherland, the UN's special envoy for migrants and refugees.

Quite apart from Syria, much of the Sahel across sub-Saharan Africa is hanging by a thread, and ISIS is expanding into every country of the Maghreb.

"It is very easy to be sanctimonious about this subject, and a lot of people are, but politicians have the hard task of dealing with it," he said, speaking at the Ambrosetti forum of world policy-makers on Lake Como.

Mr Sutherland is thankful - in a sense - that the pietistic picture of a drowned three year-old boy on the beaches of Bodrum should have goaded Europe into action at last, but is equally exasperated that policy is being driven by emotional spasms.

"There were at least 3,000 deaths in the Mediterannean last year and you don't need a photo to know that some of those too were children," he said.

For some the photo is still not enough. "Angela Merkel is showing courageous leadership but in other parts of Europe, the reaction has been terrible. The Poles and Slovaks have said they will

only accept Christians."

"This is a repudiation of everything the EU stands for. It is absolutely contrary to UN principles and international law. Is this really what we have come to? A refugee is a refugee," he said.

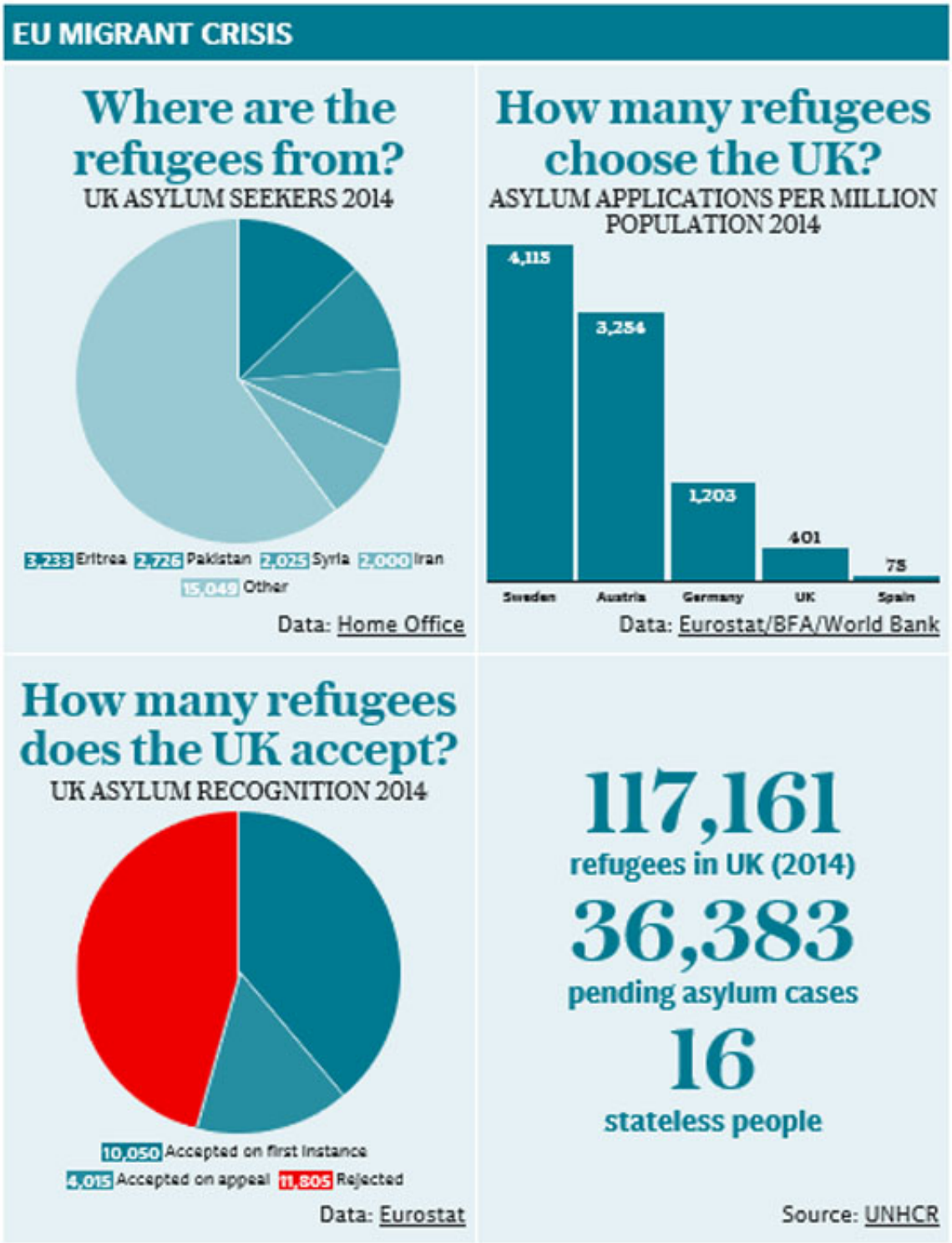
Mr Sutherland - a former European commissioner and one-time chairman of oil giant BP - declined to say whether Hungary in particular should face a suspension of its EU membership rights but said a rebuke of some sort is order.

"The treaties allow for various levels of sanctions. The decibel count on Hungary's behaviour has reached a level that is really quite serious," he told The Telegraph.

He noted acidly that the world took in 200,000 Hungarian refugees after the Soviet invasion in 1956.

It will take the statecraft of the highest level by leaders across the world to tackle the roots of the crisis, and so far the response has been abysmal.

Britain's diplomatic antennae seem to have failed badly. David Cameron, the Prime Minister, was blind-sided by Germany's move to throw open the borders and take the lead on the crisis with France.



Mr Sutherland said Britain's response has become tangled with a separate controversy over the role of the EU and the powers of Brussels, poisoning the debate.

The result is that London appears churlish, and far too slow to separate the issue of conflict refugees from economic migrants.

"In the case of the UK, the issue has been complicated by the debate about Europe and the role of the EU. There has been a lot of finger-pointing at Brussels, and it is rubbish. The member states are the problem."

Romano Prodi, the former head of the European Commission, said this will backfire against Britain, making it even less likely that Mr Cameron will secure a new treaty dispensation from Europe on friendly terms.

In the end, the UK is likely to take just as many refugees per capita as most other major countries in Western Europe, even though it is exempt from any vote on quotas due to its opt-out in the EU sphere of 'justice and home affairs'.

It has already pledged to take 15,000 refugees from Syria, transporting them directly from camps in Lebanon and the front line states. This is a wiser solution than the chaos and danger of the traffickers' routes, yet the UK has damaged its moral brand by reacting so defensively.

Mr Sutherland went on to say: "Britain has been the most welcoming country over centuries. If you walk down the street, it is the most harmonious multicultural society that exists".

The headlines across the Italian, French, and German press over recent days have been ablaze with criticisms of a "hard-nosed Britain", loosely lumped together with Hungary and the Visegrad Four in central Europe.

Mr Sutherland said the drama has been falsely presented as a European crisis. It is not. Every country has an equal responsibility under the UN code, he says.

"Proximity does not determine obligation. The fact that Lebanon is closer to Syria than the US or Finland is irrelevant under international law. The Gulf states have taken in nobody, and what about other countries?" he asked.

The world took in hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese boat people in the late 1970s. This time most outside Europe prefer to look the other way. "Historians will judge us very harshly when this is over," he concluded.

Ambrose Evans-Pritchard is the International Business Editor of the London Telegraph.