Arrival of refugees from Colombia in the framework of the "Wings for a New Future" labour corridor.
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Italy Multi-Country Office

Highlights

Between January and March 2026, **6,117 refugees and migrants arrived in Italy by sea**, the majority originating from Bangladesh (29 per cent), Somalia (15 per cent), and Pakistan (11 per cent). Children accounted for **24 per cent of arrivals**. Other people reached Italy via land and air.

On 26 January, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Barham Salih, held a private audience with **His Holiness Pope Leo XIV**, met with the **President of the Republic Sergio Mattarella** and held an exchange with **Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni**, reaffirming UNHCR's strategic dialogue with the Holy See and Italy.

On 24 March, the first group of 12 Venezuelan refugees from Colombia arrived in Italy under **"Wings for a New Future"**, one of the labour pathways developed by UNHCR in partnership with the Government of Italy, the private sector and civil society, marking a concrete step in expanding safe and regular pathways. Refugees will take up roles in the airport services.

THE NEW UN HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES

Barham Salih took office as the 12th United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees on 1 January 2026, following his election by the United Nations General Assembly on 18 December 2025. He succeeds Filippo Grandi, who concluded a 10-year tenure leading UNHCR. At a time of record global displacement and severe pressure on humanitarian resources, High Commissioner Salih brings extensive political and international experience to the role. His statement upon election is available here.

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Trends in Sea Arrivals

UNHCR works with the Italian authorities providing information on international protection to people arriving by sea, as well as tailored information to those with specific needs, and supporting identification and referral to relevant services, paying particular attention to those who have survived gender-based violence. Since October 2025 and through April 2028, this support is further strengthened through funding from the European Union's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF), in partnership with the Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration of the Ministry of Interior (MoI).

During the first quarter of 2026, **6,117 people arrived in Italy by sea**, marking a decrease compared with the same period in 2025 (reduction of 34 per cent). The decrease was driven largely by exceptionally low arrivals in January, when Cyclone Harry, a severe extratropical storm that swept across the central Mediterranean, created dangerous sea conditions and sharply reduced departures. For nearly two weeks, the combination of high winds and rough seas limited crossings and contributed to a 39 per cent reduction in arrivals compared with the same 12-day period in 2025. In the weeks following the storm, bodies were recovered along the coastlines of Sicily and Calabria, suggesting that shipwrecks may have occurred during the period when Cyclone Harry affected the Central Mediterranean. Regarding the effects of the deteriorating situation in the Middle East, no measurable impact on movements towards Europe had been observed along the Central Mediterranean route by the end of March.

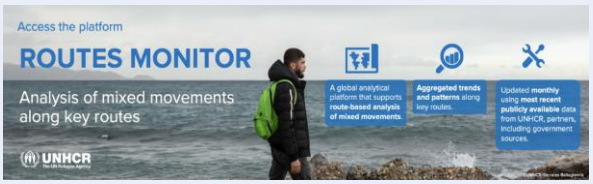
Routes taken

In early 2026, **Libya remained the main country of departure** for people arriving to Italy by sea, accounting for over nine tenths of sea crossings, although its relative share was slightly lower than in the previous year. At the same time, departures from Tunisia and Algeria increased. Together, they represented 13 per cent of all sea arrivals during the quarter. This marked a notable change from early 2025, when Libya accounted for around 93 per cent of departures and relatively few people left from other North African countries. This shift suggests a modest diversification in points of departure, which may influence future operational and protection needs along the route. Departures from Türkiye were minimal in the first months of 2026, with a single landing of 19 people recorded.

Main nationalities

In early 2025, nationals of Bangladesh, Pakistan, Egypt and the Syrian Arab Republic, represented almost two thirds of all sea arrivals, with Bangladesh alone accounting about 37 per cent as of March 2025. **During the first three months of 2026, Bangladesh remained the largest nationality** group, though in lower absolute numbers compared to the same period in 2025, representing 29 per cent of total arrivals. **Arrivals of Pakistani and Syrian nationals decreased considerably year-on-year**. The decline in arrivals of Syrian nationals appears to be directly linked to the fall of the Assad regime in December 2024, with Syrians arriving in Italy consistently reporting to UNHCR that many fellow nationals who had been awaiting departure in Libya chose instead to return to Syria. By contrast, the decrease in Pakistani arrivals appears to be less structural and more probably associated with enhanced migration control measures and strengthened cooperation between Italy and Pakistan.

UNHCR LAUNCHES A NEW PLATFORM TO ANALYZE COMPLEX JOURNEYS ACROSS KEY ROUTES



The Routes Monitor platform provides the most comprehensive overview to date of mixed movements along the main global routes and is updated monthly. It brings together multiple sources of information to show evolving trends, highlight protection needs, and support more effective responses across the full length of displacement journeys. The platform helps improve protection and solutions wherever people are, offering alternatives to dangerous journeys.

Conversely, **the proportion of Somali and Sudanese nationals increased** when comparing the first quarter of 2025 with the same period in 2026. Somali arrivals rose from 198 individuals (around 2 per cent of total sea arrivals) to 887 (15 per cent). While the drivers behind this increase remain to be fully assessed, particularly if the trend persists, the opening of a new air route from Mogadishu to Benghazi, with onward movement to Tripoli, may be a contributing factor. Arrivals of Sudanese nationals also increased, from 423 to 612, raising their share from 5 per cent to 10 per cent despite overall lower arrivals. These figures remain modest in absolute terms. The increase appears to be largely driven by the ongoing conflict in Sudan and shifting migration dynamics, including reopened routes, smuggling networks, and opportunities to finance onward travel.

Demographic profile

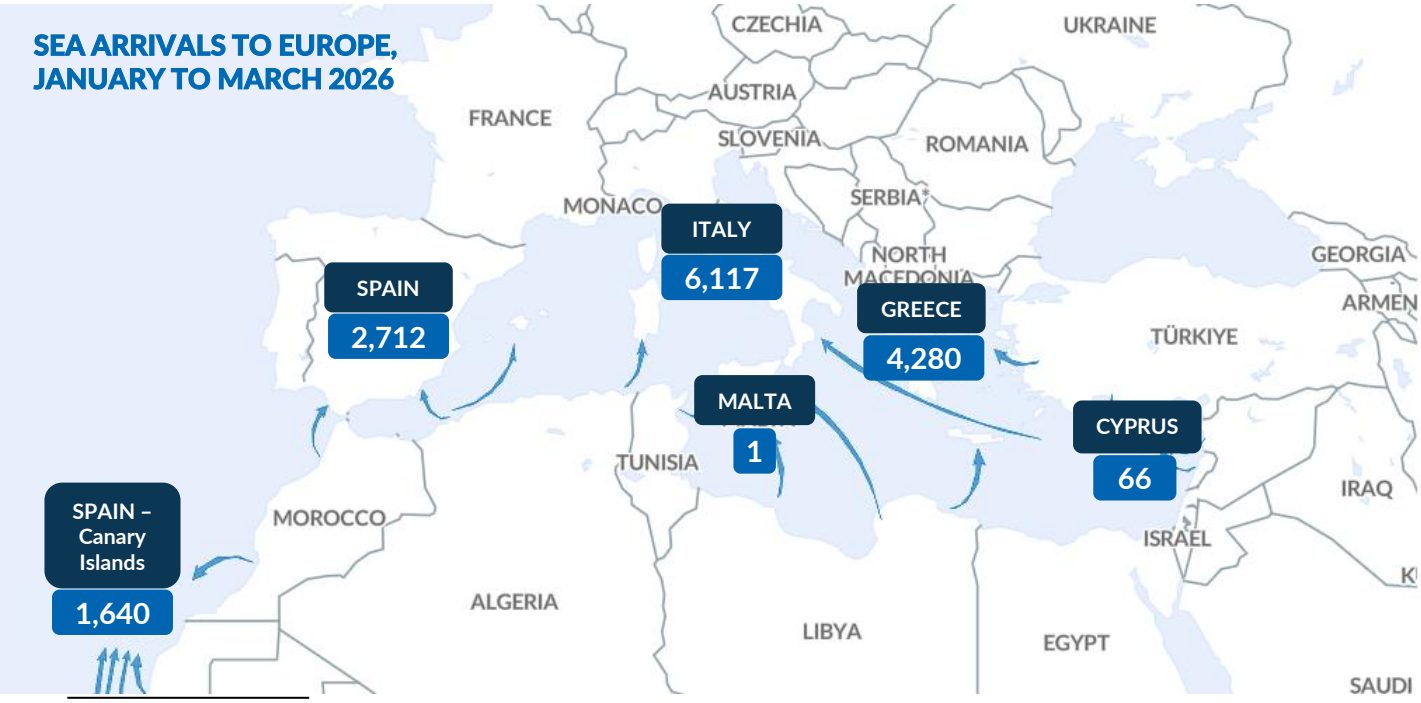
Although adult men continued to constitute the majority of those arriving, their share decreased from around four in five in early 2025 to just under three in four in the same period in 2026. In contrast, **the proportion of children increased significantly**, rising from approximately 16 per cent to nearly one quarter of all arrivals. The most substantial increase concerned unaccompanied children (UAC), whose share rose from 12 per cent to 21 per cent, with more than one in three UAC being Somali (37 per cent). The proportion of accompanied children, meanwhile, remained relatively stable.[1]

CUTRO SHIPWRECK ANNIVERSARY

Three years after the Steccato di Cutro shipwreck of 26 February 2023, which resulted in the tragic death of at least 94 people, UNHCR and IOM reiterated the urgent need for a coordinated European response on the Central Mediterranean, the world's deadliest migration route, through a joint press release.

> *... È necessario rafforzare un approccio multilaterale e coordinato lungo le rotte, che coinvolga i Paesi di origine, transito e destinazione, per garantire protezione a chi ne ha diritto, contrastare gli abusi e condividere responsabilità e soluzioni in modo più efficace."*
>
> Chiara Cardoletti, Then UNHCR Representative for Italy, the Holy See, Malta and San Marino

SEA ARRIVALS TO EUROPE, JANUARY TO MARCH 2026



[1] For further information on sea arrivals in Italy, please refer to the Italy page of the UNHCR data portal.

Asylum System

- In the first quarter of 2026, UNHCR has continued to support national authorities in Italy in preparing for the implementation of the EU Pact on Migration and Asylum, providing technical guidance and expertise across key thematic areas within its mandate.

- UNHCR has also continued working closely with the National Asylum Commission and supporting the Territorial Commissions throughout the country, contributing to enhanced quality and consistency in first-instance asylum procedures.

Persons with Specific Needs

- In the first quarter of 2026, efforts to strengthen gender-based violence (GBV) risk mitigation across Italy's reception system advanced through the joint development of a **national toolkit by UNHCR and UNICEF,** in collaboration with the Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration of the MoI. The toolkit adapts operational tools to the national asylum reception system, supporting Prefectures and reception actors in mitigating GBV risks and strengthening safeguarding mechanisms. Its roll-out has been complemented by targeted capacity-building at the national and local levels for key actors, including staff of Prefectures, reception personnel and cultural mediators.

- Through a secondment to the Italian MoI and the presence of field teams at the main entry points, UNHCR continued to engage with central and local authorities to strengthen referral systems for persons with specific needs. In the reporting period, this collaboration supported the launch of the *National Working Group on Vulnerabilities* and its technical subgroups, the development and roll-out of local Standard Operating Procedures for the implementation of the Handbook on vulnerabilities, and nationwide capacity-building on GBV and health-related identification, referral and case management — reinforcing a coherent, protection-centred response across institutional actors and territories.

- UNHCR developed an **online training programme for reception personnel** within the framework of a project supported by the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration to strengthen reception and protection services for unaccompanied children in Italy, implemented in collaboration with the MoI Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration.

Statelessness

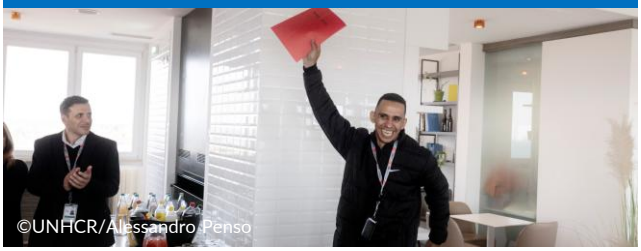
- Launched in March 2026 across Rome, Naples and Turin, the sixth edition of the Statelessness Legal Clinics reached a record of **over 400 students trained in statelessness law and practice**—the highest figure since the inception of the project in 2021. Since their launch, the Clinics have provided legal assistance to stateless persons or individuals at risk of statelessness in complex cases, while engaging law students through clinical placements. Implemented by Programma integra, and funded by the Italian Buddhist Institute Soka Gakkai, the initiative further expanded in 2026 with the inclusion of the Department of Law of the University of Verona as a self-funded partner, confirming the project's scalability and recognition as a replicable good practice.

Integration

- Building on lessons from initiatives such as *Welcome. Working for Refugee Integration* and *Spazio Comune*, UNHCR has launched **FA.SI — FAre SIstema: Reti per l'Inclusione**, a three-year project funded through the European Union's AMIF 2021–2027 and implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Labour and Social Policies, aimed at strengthening multi-level governance and territorial networks for socio-labour inclusion. Further details on the project are available here.

- In order to foster inclusive communities, UNHCR is supporting the anchoring of local integration commitments through the Integration Charter — a framework through which Municipalities commit to upholding the rights of refugees while strengthening cooperation, exchanging good practices, and advancing inclusive policies at the local level. With the Municipality of Taranto joining in January 2026, the number of signatories reached 17 nationwide, reflecting growing recognition that durable solutions are also built locally through coordinated, peer-driven approaches.

Safe Pathways



- Labour corridors for refugees are developing into a scalable complementary pathway, aligning protection objectives with labour market needs. Building on Law 50/2023, UNHCR, in collaboration with the Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation (MFA), and Labour and Social Policies and partners, is advancing pathways for refugees from Colombia, Egypt, Jordan and Uganda across multiple sectors. In the first quarter of 2026, **new pathways from Ecuador** targeting 50 refugees in the social and health services sector, **and from Lebanon,** targeting 10 refugees and migrants in the agrifood sector, received interministerial approval and will soon be launched. Meanwhile, in the first months of 2026, the **first group of 12 Venezuelan refugees arrived from Colombia** to Italy under the "Wings for a New Future" project, with planned employment in the airport services sector with the company AviaPartner.[3] A second edition of this project, targeting 50 people, has also been launched in early 2026.

- In early 2026, UNHCR supported the resettlement of **25 refugees from Niger (19) and Pakistan (6) to Italy** under the national resettlement programme coordinated by the MoI, in collaboration with the MFA and partners. All new arrivals were channeled into structured reception and inclusion pathways within the Reception and Integration System (SAI). Safe and regular pathways remain among the most effective tools to protect those most at risk while reducing reliance on dangerous routes.

- Access to higher education continues to serve as both a protection tool and a pathway to long-term self-reliance. The University Corridors for Refugees (UNICORE) programme further expanded in early 2026, with 2 new arrivals from Uganda and Kenya under its seventh edition. In March, UNHCR launched the UNICORE 8.0 edition, offering **78 scholarships across 42 Italian universities**, with arrivals expected from September 2026. The eighth edition extends the programme to Bangladesh and Burkina Faso, alongside Cameroon, Ethiopia, India, Kenya, Mozambique, Niger, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.[4]

READ HERE →
UNHCR's Recommendations to the Cypriot and Irish 2026 Presidencies of the Council of the European Union (January – December 2026)

For UNHCR's positions, policy documents, and legal guidance on international protection, visit Refworld

[2] UNHCR press release: Arrivano a Roma i primi 12 rifugiati con i corridoi lavorativi dalla Colombia: al via il progetto "Wings for a new Future" nel settore aeroportuale
[3] UNHCR press release: Corridoi universitari: apre oggi il bando per 78 borse di studio destinate a studenti rifugiati

External Relations

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- In January 2026, High Commissioner Barham Salih held high-level exchanges with the **President of the Italian Republic, Sergio Mattarella,** and with **Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni**. These discussions reaffirmed the importance of protecting and supporting people forced to flee conflict and persecution, while highlighting Italy's important role and longstanding cooperation with UNHCR across key displacement situations.[4]

- In January 2026, **UNHCR presented to the Steering Committee of the Rome Process** in Rome a series of high-impact **interventions in Niger and Chad, under the route-based approach**, supported by Italy and co-funded by the United Kingdom. The exchange provided an important opportunity to build a shared understanding of how coordinated action across countries along displacement routes can strengthen protection and support solutions for forcibly displaced people and host communities.

CLOSING OF TENURE: REFLECTIONS FROM CHIARA CARDOLETTI

In March 2026, Chiara Cardoletti concluded her tenure as UNHCR Representative for Italy, the Holy See, Malta and San Marino and assumed a new assignment in Mexico. Over six years, she steered UNHCR's work through a particularly complex period, keeping a strong focus on protecting people with specific needs, advancing safe pathways and broadening opportunities for refugee inclusion through closer collaboration with national and local authorities, the Holy See, the private sector, and partners. Read her reflections on six years of work → here.

> ***"... il mio auspicio più grande riguarda il modo in cui, a livello globale, guardiamo alla migrazione: che si continui ad affrontarla con responsabilità e con visione, ricordando sempre che il diritto di asilo non è soltanto un principio giuridico, ma una scelta di civiltà."***
>
> Chiara Cardoletti, Then UNHCR Representative for Italy, the Holy See, Malta and San Marino

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ITALY'S SUPPORT TO UNHCR EMERGENCY RESPONSE IN LEBANON

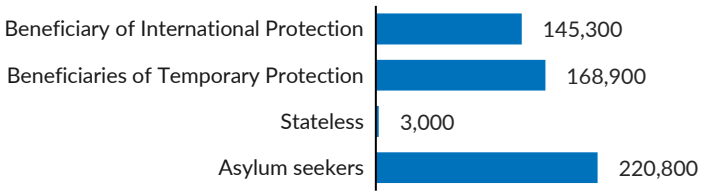
Following the escalation of conflict in the Middle East and the intensification of hostilities across Lebanon, in March 2026, the Government of Italy provided over 40 tons of life-saving supplies to UNHCR through two humanitarian airlifts, enabling the continued delivery of assistance to displaced people and affected communities across the country. A press releases can be accessed here.

[4] UNHCR press release: L'Alto Commissario dell'UNHCR Barham Salih elogia la visione di pace di Sua Santità Papa Leone XIV e l'impegno dell'Italia per la cooperazione internazionale

Italy at a glance[5]

Population figures

538,000
people as follows:



Data source: UNHCR estimates, Ministry of Interior and EUROSTAT. Data as of June 2025.

UNHCR operational presence

UNHCR staff in Italy also cover the Holy See and San Marino.

Total arrivals by air, land, and sea

19,900
arrivals in the country in Jan-Mar 2026

-13%
compared to same period in 2025

Data source: Ministry of Interior for arrivals by sea. UNHCR estimates for arrivals by land and air.

Asylum applications

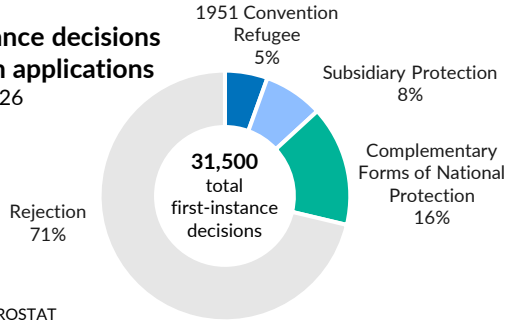
22,400
asylum applications in Jan-Feb 2026

-2%
compared to same period in 2025

Data source: EUROSTAT

First instance decisions on asylum applications

Jan–Mar 2026



Data source: EUROSTAT

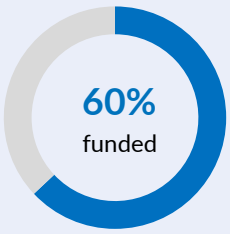
Safe pathways

40 persons arrived in the country in the period January-March 2026, including **25** through resettlement, **13** through labour mobility schemes and **2** through education pathways (UNICORE programme)

Financial information

Requested for UNHCR activities in Italy in 2026

$ 21.0 million



In Italy, from January to March 2026, **8.2 million euros** were raised. Among the private donors, a special thanks goes to **Bottega Veneta, Enel Cuore, Fondazione Amplifon, Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo, Fondazione Deloitte, Fondazione EOS Fondazione Italiana Accenture, Fondazione Prosolidar, Istituto Buddista Italiano Soka Gakkai – Ufficio 8x1000, Mediobanca, Prysmian, Pupa, Reale Mutua Foundation,** and **The Nando and Elsa Peretti Foundation** for their contributions.

UNHCR is grateful for the support from all its top government donors as well as for the generous contributions from the private sector and individuals in the reporting period.

[5] Data is based on the most updated figures available for each area.

Engagement with the Holy See

UN High Commissioner for Refugees Salih during a private audience with His Holiness Pope Leo XIV © Vatican Media

- In January 2026, shortly after his appointment, one of the first official visits of High Commissioner Barham Salih included an audience with **His Holiness Pope Leo XIV**, as well as a meeting with Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher, **Secretary for Relations with States and International Organizations** at the Secretariat of State to discuss global displacement and ongoing humanitarian crises. At a moment of record global displacement and mounting pressure on humanitarian systems, the exchanges reinforced **a shared commitment to advancing peace, human dignity and protection for forcibly displaced people** and underscored the critical role of the Catholic Church and faith-based actors in delivering protection, supporting social cohesion, and promoting durable solutions.[6]

> ***"... Our cooperation with the Holy See is paramount, recognizing its vital moral, diplomatic and operational role in promoting solidarity and durable solutions for refugees."***
>
> High Commissioner Salih commenting on the audience with His Holiness Pope Leo XIV

IN THE NEWS

Vatican News - A conversation with High Commissioner Salih on faith, displacement and solidarity

L'Osservatore Romano- The commitment of the Church to those forced to flee, in focus

UNHCR - High Commissioner Salih reflects on the audience with His Holiness Pope Leo XIV

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[6]UNHCR press release: L'Alto Commissario dell'UNHCR Barham Salih elogia la visione di pace di Sua Santità Papa Leone XIV e l'impegno dell'Italia per la cooperazione internazionale