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EDITORIAL: Japan has international responsibility to help curb refugee crisis

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Endless streams of refugees and migrants from the Middle East and Africa are arriving in Europe every day. The number of people who have entered Europe seeking refuge has already topped 300,000 this year, surpassing the total of 220,000 for all of 2014. Many of them have fled war in Syria and other countries embroiled in conflict. They cross the Aegean Sea or the Mediterranean Sea and then travel by land to reach their destinations, such as Germany or Northern Europe. Protection and acceptance of these displaced people is an urgent humanitarian challenge that’s a race against the clock.

We hope that European countries, which are on the front line of the crisis, will work out a coherent and effective strategy to deal with the situation. But at the same time, there should be global efforts for an emergency response to what is happening.

Already, Canada, Australia and some Latin American countries have expressed their intention to accept refugees and migrants. In Europe, Germany has been leading the region’s efforts to cope with the crisis, with major European nations making tough and commendable decisions to provide aid to the refugees. Other major countries, including the United States and Japan, should swiftly come up with measures to provide relief to people seeking refuge in various parts of the world.

The influx of refugees and migrants into Europe started surging around 2011 following the “Arab Spring” series of anti-government protests and uprisings that spread across the Middle East. Previously, many migrants crossed the Mediterranean from North Africa. Since the beginning of this year, however, traveling to East Europe via Turkey and Greece has become the most popular route among these people. Some heartbreaking tragedies involving people fleeing their countries have occurred in recent weeks.

In August, more than 70 migrants were found dead in a refrigerator truck in Austria. This month, the world was shocked to see photos of a drowned 3-year-old Syrian boy washed up on a beach in Turkey. Earlier this week, the European Union proposed to redistribute 160,000 refugees among members of the bloc. Even in Europe, which has solid track records of accepting refugees, there are strong concerns among citizens about accepting large numbers of people with different customs and cultural backgrounds. There are also anti-immigration rightist movements in many European countries.

Even so, following Germany’s lead, major European nations like Britain and France are moving in the direction of accepting more refugees. This is a welcome trend. The United Nations plans to hold a high-level meeting on this issue during the annual General Assembly sessions that start later this month. In order to secure a quicker international response to the crisis, Germany and France could lead discussions on creating an international framework for multilateral coordination over the acceptance of refugees.

Continuous waves of people seeking refuge in foreign countries represent one of the most serious crises in the world today. For years, people have been fleeing countries mired in violence and chaos, such as Syria, where civil war has been raging for four years, Afghanistan and Somalia.

There is also an urgent need to provide support to refugees in countries near conflict-torn regions, including Turkey, Pakistan and Lebanon, which host the largest numbers of refugees. It is also necessary to enhance international efforts to help end conflicts that are generating floods of refugees.

For the administration of Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, the refugee crisis, which requires global responses, can be a good test of its diplomatic strategy based on what Abe calls “proactive pacifism.” Japan acknowledged only 11 refugees last year. It is time for Tokyo to seriously think about what it can do to fulfill its international responsibility.

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