

INTERNATIONAL

EU sees record rise in asylum requests, jump 28 per cent so far in 2023

The number of migrants lodging asylum applications in the EU has jumped 28 percent in the first half of this year compared to the same period last year, official figures released Tuesday showed. Between January and the end of June this year, there were 519,000 such requests made in the 27-nation bloc and associated countries Switzerland and Norway, the European Union Agency for Asylum (EUAA) said. That puts the EU on track to receive more than one million asylum-seekers this year -- the biggest number since 2015-2016 when it saw a huge influx, mainly Syrians fleeing the war in their country. In 2015, the bloc received 1.35 million asylum requests, then in 2016 there were 1.25 million more applications. Numbers dropped in 2017 after the EU did a deal with Turkey to have it clamp down on irregular border crossings, and during the height of the Covid pandemic in 2020 and 2021 when travel restrictions were in place. Numbers have since rebounded, with 2022 seeing a 53-percent rise in applications, putting many EU countries "under pressure," the EUAA said. Accommodation and support is already stretched thin in many cases as several EU countries are hosting four million Ukrainian refugees who benefit from a protection status separate from asylum because of Russia's war on their country. Syrians and Afghans account for nearly a quarter of asylum applications received so far this year. The next main nationalities seeking protection in Europe are those from Venezuela, Turkey, Colombia, Bangladesh and Pakistan. Germany, which took in most of the Syrian refugees in 2015-2016, continues to be the top EU destination for asylum-seekers, principally those from Syria and Afghanistan. Germany received 62 per cent of all asylum applications by Syrians in the EU in the first half of 2023. Spain was the main destination for Venezuelan asylum-seekers, who tended to be granted humanitarian visas rather than asylum status where their cases warranted protection. Overall, 41 per cent of applicants received either refugee status or another form of protection allowing them to stay, but there were very different outcomes associated with different nationalities. Syrians and Afghans, with conflict and repression at home, were more likely to get such status, while Turks were more likely to be rejected. The EUAA said the number of Russians and Iranians being granted protection in Europe has increased compared to previous years.

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Japan launches rocket carrying X-ray telescope to explore origins of universe, lunar lander

Japan launched a rocket Thursday carrying an X-ray telescope that will explore the origins of the universe as well as a small lunar lander. The launch of the HII-A rocket from Tanegashima Space Center in southwestern Japan was shown on live video by the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency, known as JAXA. "We have a liftoff," the narrator at JAXA said as the rocket flew up in a burst of smoke then flew over the Pacific. Thirteen minutes after the launch, the rocket put into orbit around Earth a satellite called the X-Ray Imaging and Spectroscopy Mission, or XRISM, which will measure the speed and makeup of what lies between galaxies. That information helps in studying how celestial objects were formed, and hopefully can lead to solving the mystery of how the universe was created, JAXA says. In cooperation with NASA, JAXA will look at the strength of light at different wavelengths, the temperature of things in space and their shapes and brightness. David Alexander, director of the Rice Space Institute at Rice University, believes the mission is significant for delivering insight into the properties of hot plasma, or the superheated matter that makes up much of the universe. Plasmas have the potential to be used in various ways, including healing wounds, making computer chips and cleaning the environment. "Understanding the distribution of this hot plasma in space and time, as well as its dynamical motion, will shed light on

diverse phenomena such as black holes, the evolution of chemical elements in the universe and the formation of galactic clusters," Alexander said. Also aboard the latest Japanese rocket is the Smart Lander for Investigating Moon, or SLIM, a lightweight lunar lander. The Smart Lander won't make lunar orbit for three or four months after the launch and would likely attempt a landing early next year, according to the space agency.

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