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Overview of UNHCR’s operations in Europe**A. Situational context**

The operational context in Europe changed significantly in 2015, following a dramatic increase in arrivals by refugees and migrants and large-scale onward movements through the region. Europe also faced ongoing major displacement situations, notably in Ukraine.

Over 2 million asylum applications were lodged in 38 European countries in 2015, nearly three times the number of applications made in 2014 (some 709,800). According to government statistics, the main countries of origin were the Syrian Arab Republic (675,700), Afghanistan (406,300) and Iraq (253,600).¹ Around 1.23 million of the total asylum applications made in the region were lodged in European Union Member States.

Increasing numbers of refugees risked their lives to cross the Mediterranean Sea in search of safety and protection in Europe. Over 1 million people arrived by boat in 2015, with 84 per cent originating from the world’s top 10 refugee producing countries and movements including a substantial number of women, children and vulnerable persons. In Greece, for example, over 35 per cent of new arrivals were children, many unaccompanied or separated from their families. Some 3,770 people died or were reported missing in the Mediterranean Sea in 2015.

As of the end of 2015, Turkey was host to the largest number of refugees under UNHCR’s mandate in the world, including more than 2.5 million Syrians,² and over 250,000 asylum-seekers and refugees of other nationalities, predominantly Iraqis and Afghans. Syrian refugees in Turkey continued to benefit from temporary protection, and were provided with access to registration, documentation, a legal status and a number of essential services, including education and primary health care. UNHCR supported Turkey in its response to the Syria crisis through the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) for 2016-2017, with a view to ensuring that refugees have access to basic rights and assistance. Syrians carrying passports have been able to enter Turkey freely through official border crossings. However, an agreement between the European Union and Turkey, as well as increased restrictions at borders within Europe and efforts to limit the flow of people, have led to heightened border controls.

During the second half of 2015, the onward movement of people seeking protection significantly increased through the western Balkans, and refugee issues attracted high-profile political and media attention in Central, Northern and Western Europe. UNHCR remained concerned by border control measures adopted by some European Union Member States, including the erecting of border fences and other deterrence measures, which led large numbers of people, including those with international protection needs, to

¹ UNHCR notes that the way statistical information is recorded in Europe may include instances of double counting.

² Registration data provided by the Directorate General of Migration Management, Ministry of Interior of Turkey, as of 31 December 2015.

become stranded at border-crossing points. UNHCR and its partners continued to provide lifesaving support, including in Greece and the western Balkans, as well as to monitor changes in travel routes to inform contingency planning and to ensure an adequate humanitarian response. The European Commission, together with UNHCR and other actors, advocated a comprehensive and harmonized response to the increasing number of arrivals, based on the principles of solidarity and responsibility sharing.

In Ukraine, the authorities reported more than 1.67 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) at the end of December 2015.³ The humanitarian situation, particularly in eastern Ukraine, remained precarious, with ongoing large-scale displacement presenting significant challenges for both IDPs themselves, as well as their host communities. UNHCR advocated rights of and assistance to IDPs, including to allow IDPs to vote in elections and to facilitate the movement of people and goods across the “front lines” of the conflict. UNHCR and its partners continued to be hampered by restrictions on humanitarian access to certain areas. At the end of 2015, the number of Ukrainians who had sought asylum or other forms of legal stay in neighbouring countries amounted to almost 1.1 million, mainly in the Russian Federation (858,400) and in Belarus (127,500).

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Support for a collective European response

The scope and scale of the refugee crisis in Europe in 2015 posed significant challenges for the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). UNHCR welcomed the adoption of the European Agenda on Migration in May 2015,⁴ as part of efforts to build solidarity amongst European Union Member States and to achieve solutions. In September and December 2015, the European Commission proposed further measures to address the refugee crisis and tackle root causes, which were also welcomed by the Office. The 17-point plan of action,⁵ agreed upon by the leaders of concerned countries at a meeting on the western Balkans migration route in October 2015, was a constructive step forward.

UNHCR continued to advocate a holistic and coordinated response, including through the development of the Special Mediterranean Initiative (SMI), increased legal and safe avenues to access Europe, and effective and coherent implementation of the CEAS. UNHCR has provided technical and material support for the European Union scheme to relocate up to 160,000 people in need of international protection. UNHCR has also supported the creation of reception centres (“hotspots”), ensuring availability of technical equipment, as well as mechanisms for the identification and referral of persons of concern and two-way and responsive communication with asylum-seekers and refugees.

Emergency response

In 2015, UNHCR significantly strengthened its partnership and coordination structures in Europe in response to the emergency. The Office also enhanced its protection monitoring, analysis and interventions capacity, particularly in the area of emergency reception arrangements. UNHCR and its partners distributed some 41,340 blankets, 3,120 hygiene kits, 4,660 mats and 9,430 raincoats in Croatia, Greece, Serbia, Slovenia and the former

³ UNHCR and other humanitarian actors have recently estimated that there are approximately 800,000 IDPs in Ukraine. This figure forms the basis for the inter-agency 2016 Ukraine humanitarian response plan, which is pending the Government’s endorsement.

⁴ Available from: http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/index_en.htm.

⁵ Available from: http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-5904_en.htm.

Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, and invested in winterized reception and accommodation facilities.

These activities were carried out within the framework of UNHCR's regional protection strategy, which translates UNHCR's global strategic priorities into the specific context of the Europe emergency. The three core objectives of the strategy focus on ensuring safe access to territory, a protection-centred and participatory humanitarian response, and access to effective protection systems and durable solutions.

Safeguarding asylum space

In implementing the regional protection strategy, UNHCR continued to advocate access to territory, asylum, and protection against refoulement. UNHCR intervened to ensure access to territory (both by sea and by land) for specific individuals and groups, as well as to asylum procedures for all persons seeking international protection, regardless of nationality. The Office provided capacity-building for authorities, including on registration procedures and rights and obligations under international human rights and refugee law. UNHCR undertook regular and systematic protection monitoring of asylum-seekers and refugees at both border points and in detention, disseminated information to persons of concern regarding their rights and obligations, and provided support to relevant civil society organizations.

In Eastern Europe and the southern Caucasus, the second phase of the Asylum Systems Quality Initiative (2015 – 2017) was launched following a request for continuation of the project from participating governments. Phase II will focus on ensuring that national asylum systems are in line with international and European norms, and will involve an expanded range of national authorities, including border guards and judges.

Reducing protection risks

In order to reduce protection risks for persons of concern, UNHCR significantly strengthened its presence in countries and territories affected by the refugee emergency, including Greece and the western Balkans, to assist relevant authorities in their response. UNHCR advocated and supported implementation of camp coordination and camp management. Key areas of concern in this regard were the need for gender-separated and well-lit water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities, safe sleeping places for women and children, child-friendly spaces, medical and psychosocial assistance, as well as legal counselling and information on asylum procedures. UNHCR worked with a range of partners to strengthen welfare and child protection systems and to ensure that decisions made on behalf of children were based on a best interests assessment. Nonetheless, the Office remained concerned about serious protection risks in certain countries, especially for women, children and persons with specific needs.

In Ukraine, UNHCR successfully advocated amendments, adopted in December 2015, to align the national IDP law more closely with the “Guiding principles on internal displacement”.⁶ UNHCR led the protection as well as the shelter and non-food items (NFI) clusters, and supported a “winterization” programme across eastern Ukraine, including through the provision of cash assistance.

⁶ The adopted amendments are available (in Ukrainian only) from: http://w1.c1.rada.gov.ua/pls/zweb2/webproc4_1?pf3511=54093. The national law in its entirety is available (in Ukrainian only) from: <http://zakon4.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1706-18/page2>.

Expanding opportunities for durable solutions

In order to support protection and solutions for refugees and reduce the loss of life in the Mediterranean Sea, UNHCR advocated the establishment of legal pathways to Europe (both European Union and non-European Union countries) from countries hosting large refugee populations. Such pathways may include resettlement, humanitarian admission, family reunification, student scholarships and labour migration programmes. In this regard, UNHCR welcomed the conclusions adopted by the Council of the European Union⁷ that would allow for the resettlement of 20,000 refugees from outside European territory over a two year period (2015-2017), but remained concerned about restrictions on family reunification introduced by some European Union Member States.

UNHCR continued its efforts to identify and address the needs of the remaining vulnerable families who were displaced as part of the large-scale crises in the 1990s in the western Balkans, with a view to completing UNHCR's operational engagement for these populations by the end of 2017.

Addressing statelessness

In 2015, UNHCR continued its global advocacy to end statelessness. In this context, Italy acceded to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness in December 2015, and Turkey to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons in March 2015. Under the Luxembourg Presidency, the Council of the European Union adopted its first conclusion on statelessness in December 2015.⁸

Armenia amended its nationality law to grant citizenship to all children born on its territory who would otherwise be stateless. Montenegro adopted legislation to provide free access to late birth registration procedures for individuals born outside the formal health care system, benefiting in particular members of Roma communities. The Republic of Moldova conducted a nation-wide campaign that led to the issuance of nationality documents to over 212,000 persons who had previously relied on expired Soviet passports and had never been recognized as Moldovan citizens.

In a landmark decision, the Hungarian Constitutional Court held that a provision limiting access to statelessness determination procedures to persons lawfully staying in the country was in breach of international law. Kosovo⁹ adopted an administrative instruction in April 2015 establishing a statelessness determination procedure and granting protection status to stateless persons.

C. Financial information

The 2016 budget for Europe approved by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme in October 2015 amounted to US\$ 516.9 million. As at end January 2016, the budget for the region stood at US\$ 736.0 million, reflecting an increase of US\$ 219.1 million, primarily to address the emergency situation in Europe and the needs of Syrian refugees, mainly in Turkey. The budget increase was also the result of increased requirements for IDPs in Ukraine, as well as for Iraqi refugees in the region.

Twenty-three per cent of funds are allocated to protection, advocacy and capacity-building activities, the provision of support to IDPs, and the prevention of and response to

⁷ Available from: <http://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2015/06/26-euco-conclusions/>.

⁸ Available from: http://www.consilium.europa.eu/press-releases-pdf/2015/12/40802205973_en_635848429800000000.pdf.

⁹ References to Kosovo shall be understood in the context of Security Council Resolution 1244 (1999).

statelessness. Forty-one per cent of the budget is allocated to supporting Syrian refugees in the region, while 29 per cent is allocated to the emergency response in Europe. Of the total regional budget, 56 per cent is allocated to Eastern Europe; 35 per cent to Northern/Western/Central/Southern Europe; and 9 per cent to South-Eastern Europe.

In 2015 UNHCR issued supplementary appeals amounting to a total of US\$ 128 million in financial requirements for the Special Mediterranean Initiative (SMI) (June 2015 to December 2016), including US\$ 77.4 million in supplementary requirements; as well as the winterization plan for the refugee crisis in Europe, amounting to US\$ 96.15 million (November 2015 to February 2016). The “Regional refugee and migrant response plan for Europe: eastern Mediterranean and western Balkans route” (RMRP), providing a framework for the inter-agency emergency response in Europe in 2016, contained financial requirements of US\$ 550 million. UNHCR’s supplementary requirements for 2016 are currently being updated and consolidated with the needs outlined in previous appeals, and will be published in a new supplementary appeal to be issued in March 2016.
