

# Refugee Homelessness in Hungary



United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees  
Regional Representation for Central Europe  
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# 1 Summary

This report presents findings from a research project on refugee homelessness in Hungary undertaken as a follow up to the 2009 Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) Participatory Assessment. The research was carried out by the UNHCR Regional Representation for Central Europe (RRCE) with input from the Menedék Association. The aim of the research was to explore the extent, nature and root causes of refugee homelessness in Hungary.

The present report does not purport to provide a thorough analysis of the phenomenon of refugee homelessness in Hungary or its causes. It solely attempts to present a snapshot of the situation facing some refugees, largely Somalis, lacking access to adequate housing in Budapest, during a period of six weeks in late 2009. Further research is needed to understand this phenomenon at depth, its implications and how it affects other refugee communities.

The report is based on fifteen in-depth one-to-one interviews with homeless refugees in Budapest conducted from late October to early December 2009. The 'target group' of the research was 'homeless refugees'. The term 'refugee' refers to those third country nationals who are recognised by the Republic of Hungary as either refugees or beneficiaries of subsidiary protection pursuant to Act LXXX of 2007 on Asylum. As for the term 'homeless', this is used to describe those persons recognised to be in need of international protection, who do not have access to adequate housing, meaning that they are either roofless (sleeping on the streets without shelter of any kind), or houseless (with a place to sleep in institutions or temporary shelter). In a few cases, the term is also used to refer to persons who are at serious risk of becoming homeless as a result of insecure living conditions (e.g. insecure tenancy, at risk of eviction due to high housing costs as a proportion of overall income or loss of employment).

During the first phase of the research, the network of key informants was identified (including refugee assisting NGOs, religious organisations providing



assistance to refugees, organisations working with homeless people, homeless shelters and other local organisations). The research team then endeavoured to map the geographical location of homeless refugees in the districts of Budapest using the secondary information provided by key informants as well as information from refugees. In order to reach out to the target group to the fullest extent possible, a combination of different mapping techniques were used, including the so-called 'snowball' technique and the random selection method. Interviewees were identified on the basis of specific characteristics, such as their legal status, age, gender, family composition as well as with regard to their special needs (women at risk, single mothers with children, persons sleeping rough, refugees in poor psychological condition). In total, fifteen refugees were interviewed as part of this research project. They were of Somali nationality (14 out of 15) and mostly men (12 men and 3 women).

It is difficult to have a correct estimate of the size of a refugee population in an urban setting such as that of Budapest. High mobility might further complicate attempts to obtain more than a rough estimate of the extent of homelessness among refugees in the Hungarian capital. During the research, respondents noted that the number of refugees within the Somali community who are either homeless or facing a serious risk of becoming homeless in Budapest is not fixed but it fluctuates over time between twenty and fifty persons.

The current research was coordinated by Katinka Huszár as part of her internship with the UNHCR Regional Representation for Central Europe (RRCE). It was conducted by Katinka Huszar and Areti Sianni, UNHCR Regional Integration/Resettlement Expert with support from Mária Barna, psychologist at Menedék Association, and Eszter Somogyi, intern at UNHCR RRCE. Input to the research was provided by Ágnes Ambrus, Head of Hungary Unit, Jbour Nadia, Senior Regional Protection Officer, William Ejalu, Protection Assistant and Zoltán Tóth, Assistant PI Officer at the UNHCR Representation for Central Europe.



## 2 Key Findings

Based upon research findings, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- Refugees at greatest risk of becoming homeless in Hungary were those who had engaged in onward movements to other EU Member States following status recognition or after a brief stay at the Bicske Pre-Integration Centre and were subsequently forcibly or otherwise returned to Hungary. Thirteen interviewees claimed to have left Hungary upon status recognition; out of these seven had sought asylum in another European country (one case submitted asylum claims in two EU Member States before being returned to Hungary). The rest reported having travelled to visit friends or family abroad or had tried to find employment in the informal economy.
- Refugees' decision to engage in onward movements was reported to be primarily linked to survival concerns rather than being motivated by refugee aspirations for economic betterment or interest in more generous welfare provisions available in other EU Member States. Among the key determinants reported to have influenced refugee attitudes towards integration in Hungary as well as choice of livelihood strategies upon status recognition were:
  - the lack of family reunification prospects in Hungary for those Somali refugees with spouses and children in their country of origin;
  - the absence of “good examples” of successful refugee integration in Hungary;
  - the lack of opportunities to acquire knowledge of the Hungarian language and how the system works through formal educational or other channels or informal communication with Hungarians;
- the real or perceived lack of employment prospects and prospects of earning an income to support family members remaining in Somalia.



- Informal refugee information networks were reported to play a vital role in the process of individual decision making (whether to engage in onward movement, to submit a request for family reunification, to move to the Bicske Pre-Integration Centre). Respondents had little access to accurate or detailed information and appeared to make decisions without much regard or understanding of legal or welfare-related repercussions. With very few exceptions, those who had moved to Bicske after status recognition reported to have had little contact with the social workers of the Office of Immigration and Nationality (OIN) at the Pre-Integration Centre.
- Upon return to Hungary, respondents found themselves in a highly vulnerable situation as they no longer qualified for social welfare support available at Bicske Pre-Integration Centre. While they were still eligible to access the minimum financial resources available for two years from status recognition to refugees attending Hungarian classes at community level, these were not immediately available to them with waiting times for accessing this support ranging from few weeks to two months or more.
- The absence of an established Somali refugee community in Hungary was considered by respondents to constitute a key barrier to effective integration. The community was found to lack the financial and institutional resources to play a supportive role in the process of integration of recently recognised refugees. At informal/inter-personal level however, strong cohesion within the group was observed providing - albeit in a very limited way - a safety net for some homeless refugees in the form of information, material and emotional support. In the case of many respondents, access to basic nutrition and shelter was only available through other refugees upon forced return to Hungary and until such time when they could enrol in Hungarian language classes and access minimum public financial support as a result.

- Those interviewed lacked adequate information on integration entitlements and available community based services. In their majority, they reported having been in contact with Menedék Association while some also knew the Cordélia Foundation from either Debrecen or Bicske.
- Respondents reported living in highly precarious housing conditions with six out of fifteen interviewees claiming to live in a shelter for the homeless. Three were sleeping rough in the streets at the time of interviews despite harsh weather conditions and appeared to have little prospects of finding adequate accommodation. Two out of three who had managed to rent an apartment were at serious risk of losing their accommodation.
- Despite living in precarious housing conditions, only few respondents reported feeling physically insecure in Hungary. Three refugees claimed to have been physically assaulted. Two of them - one being a disabled refugee with limited mobility in one of his arms due to bullet wounds - were beaten up by drunken homeless Hungarians while sleeping rough in the streets. Another was attacked by a group of skinheads on the day of the Hungarian National Holiday on 23 October 2009. He was repeatedly kicked in the abdomen and other parts of his body before he managed to escape.
- Only two out of fifteen respondents had succeeded in obtaining some temporary employment in Hungary. Both of them had finished secondary school and had some past work experience. One respondent, who never engaged in onward movement, had completed a vocational training programme in Dubai where he had obtained a professional qualification. In Hungary however he had mostly been able to find menial, unskilled jobs. At the time of the interview, he was unemployed and in receipt of incapacity benefit due to work related injuries incurred while working in building demolition shortly after being recognised as a refugee.
- The majority of respondents viewed their future in Hungary to be bleak noting that there had nothing to build a life with in Hungary. Six out of fifteen respondents confirmed that they would engage in repeat onward movement if they have the opportunity in order to have a place to sleep and eat. The research team heard informally of two respondents having left the country by January 2010. Three respondents noted that out of desperation, they would prefer to return to Somalia rather than continue living under current deplorable conditions.





## 3 Conclusions and Recommendations

Hungary does not have a legal or policy framework including a strategy that deals specifically with the integration of persons recognized to be in need of international protection. Under the Act LXXX of 2007 on Asylum, refugees and persons with subsidiary protection have the rights and obligations of a Hungarian citizen. They are furthermore entitled to accommodation, meals and pre-integration services provided at Bicske OIN run Pre-Integration Centre for the period of time stipulated in Section 41 Subsections (1)-(3) of Government Decree 301/2007.(XI.9.) on the implementation of the Asylum Law. Upon leaving the centre, they are entitled to some special benefits including Hungarian language classes up to 520 hours, a subsistence allowance of HUF 28,500 for a period of two years from status recognition pending on attendance of language courses as well as a monthly housing allowance and establishment grant of HUF 171,000. There is no government agency with a statutory responsibility for refugee integration at community level. Once refugees move out of Bicske, they mostly rely on fragmented, under-funded and project based refugee support services in Budapest run by NGOs. These cannot provide solutions to what are often structural problems of integration requiring a strategic, cross-departmental response.

The present report presents a snapshot of the situation facing some refugees, largely Somalis, lacking access to adequate housing in Budapest, during a period of six weeks in late 2009. While limited in scope, the research sheds some light on certain aspects of the Hungarian refugee integration framework that appear to be gravely failing refugees. In the opinion of all but one research respondents, reception facilities at the Debrecen Reception Centre as well as the present system of camp-based pre-integration services have been less than effective in equipping refugees with the tools to integrate in and contribute to the society. While some pre-integration programs are in place at Bicske Reception Centre, these appear to have inadvertently failed to prepare respondents for independent life through acquisition of Hungarian language skills and the



development of an understanding of rights, entitlements, obligations and available economic and other opportunities in Hungary. Caught in a vicious circle of hopelessness and without any examples of successful integration among Somali refugees in Hungary, most research respondents opted for onward movement to other European countries. Inadvertently punished with homelessness and hunger as a result of exercising freedom of movement and without access to an adequate level of community based-support services in Budapest, a number declared their intention to engage in repeat onward movement in order to have “a place to eat and sleep even if it is only for a few months”.

Based on the evidence collated through the research, failures to integrate in Hungary appear to have entailed considerable human as well as financial costs. The latter were not only incurred by Hungary but also other European countries whose asylum systems persons recognised as refugees by the Hungarian government made use of in the absence of family reunification, employment or housing prospects in the country which had granted them asylum in the first place.

In this context, UNHCR recommends that consideration is given to:

- the urgent establishment by the Office of the Prime Minister of an Emergency Task Force to coordinate action at inter-ministerial level for addressing the current housing crisis facing homeless refugees in Budapest. UNHCR stands to support the work of such Task Force and work with the government authorities to develop a strategy that guarantees access to adequate housing for all refugees;

- OIN conducting a review of pre-integration arrangements. Consideration should be given to gradually moving away from camp based pre-integration services to a model of community based integration services. This would involve the provision of short-term pre-integration assistance on a needs basis and in parallel;
  - the establishment of cooperation platforms between local authorities, labour and social welfare offices, schools, health providers and NGOs working together in the planning, development and delivery of community based services in selected localities in Budapest or elsewhere where the majority of refugees settle
  - the provision of adequate financial support to refugees and their family members to enable their early settlement in the community upon or soon after status recognition;
  - the introduction of measures to minimize isolation and separation during the reception phase and promote early connections with mainstream public services, local employers and community actors at local/neighbourhood level;
  - the development of quality legal advice and mediation services at community level to support refugee access to mainstream social welfare or specialised integration assistance
- OIN urgently conducting a review of social services provided to refugees in Bicske Pre-Integration Centre to assess their effectiveness in preparing and assisting refugees for independent life including with respect to facilitating the transition from camp based to independent housing in the community, making informed decisions about the future as well as being fully aware of the consequences of unauthorised onward movement to other European countries.
- introducing measures to enable refugees returning from other EU Member States to effectively reintegrate into Hungary through provision of upon arrival accommodation and early access to social benefits, training and advice enabling them to establish themselves and find permanent housing and employment.



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## 4 Respondent Profile

### Age, Gender, Nationality

Within the framework of the “Research on Refugee Homelessness in Hungary” fifteen interviews were conducted during the period of October 2009 to December 2009. 80% of respondents were men while 20% were women. In mid-September 2009, there were reportedly seven Somali women facing homelessness in Budapest. At the time the research was undertaken however, only one of these women remained in Hungary with the rest having already engaged in repeat onward movement to other EU Member States. She reportedly also left Hungary shortly after being interviewed for this project.

Fourteen interviewees were of Somali nationality and came from the administrative region of Mogadishu. One interviewee was Palestinian from the Gaza Strip. While the research team heard of refugees of other national/ethnic background being homeless in Budapest and made attempts to establish contact with them, this proved impossible within the timeframe of the research project. With respect to respondents’ age, this ranged from 20 to 33 years old.

### Legal Status in Hungary

All fifteen interviewees were recognised as Convention refugees in Hungary. Most had arrived in the country between November 2007 and November 2008. Seven among them had been recognised as refugees within a period of three months from applying for asylum, three after four months and four after five months. Only one respondent had to wait for a decision for over six months.



## Family and Marital Status

The majority of the interviewees had left their immediate family in their country of origin. Four respondents had spouses or dependent children in Mogadishu region. Children left in Somalia were reportedly under the care of parents, grandparents or siblings of the interviewees whom the interviewees were expected to financially support.

## Educational Background and Employment Status

No significant diversity in the educational background of respondents was noted. Forty-three per cent had only finished elementary school. One had not participated in formal education. Three interviewees confirmed to have finished secondary school, one of them having also participated in vocational training while in Finland during the process of examination of his asylum claim following onward movement from Hungary.

Five out of the fourteen Somali respondents confirmed to have worked while living in Somalia. Only one of the interviewees was employed as a Mathematics-English teacher, others mostly worked as waiters (2 persons), drivers (1 person) or as manual workers (1 person).

Two respondents had managed to find some employment in Hungary. One of them, the Mathematics-English teacher mentioned above, was registered at the local labour office and sometimes did minor translation work on an ad hoc basis. Another had also finished secondary school and had worked in Dubai for a number of years as a mechanic (3 years), in catering (7 years) and in a private firm (6 years). He had taken up to fifteen temporary jobs in Hungary mostly involving unskilled, manual labour. Due to a work-related injury, at the time of the interview, he was unemployed.

## Mental and Physical Health Condition

Respondents reported suffering from anxiety (including sleeping disturbances) due to uncertainty about their future. While in Debrecen or Bicske reception and pre-integration centres, eleven out of fifteen persons received regular psychological counselling by the Cordélia Foundation. During the research project, one female respondent was assessed by the Cordélia Foundation to be at high risk due to poor psychological and physical health condition. Two persons reported having serious memory failure due to past trauma.

Seven respondents claimed to be suffering from various physical health problems (abdominal pain being the most frequent complain). One respondent was physically disabled as a result of having been shot in his abdomen and arm in Somalia.





# Root Causes of Refugee Homelessness

## 5.1. Engagement in onward movements to other EU Member States

Thirteen out of fifteen interviewees had left Hungary after being granted refugee status for another European country (Norway, Sweden, Finland, Germany and the Netherlands); out of these seven had applied for asylum there. The rest claimed to have travelled to visit friends or family abroad and had tried to find employment in the informal economy. On average, those who had engaged in onward movement had spent between six to eighteen months abroad.

Refugees' decision to engage in onward movements was reported to be primarily linked to survival concerns rather than being motivated by refugee aspirations for economic betterment. A combination of different factors influenced the respondents' decision to leave Hungary for another European country.

- **Lack of information of consequences of engaging in onward movement**

Some respondents reported not to have received adequate information on the consequences of unauthorized onward movement to other European countries for the purpose of seeking asylum or settling permanently there. They also claimed not to have been aware of the consequences on eligibility for integration entitlements of leaving the Bicske Pre-Integration Centre without prior authorization.

HA, female/Somali/26, travelled to Sweden and then to Finland in order to work and support her family in Somalia. In Finland, she sought to apply for a work permit and claimed to have been surprised when informed that this was not an option for her given her status of recognised refugee in Hungary. She was returned to Hungary a few months later.



HIA, male/Somali/24, left the Bicske Pre-integration Centre without seeking authorization after four months of stay there. He travelled to Sweden to visit family members and look for a job. There, he stayed at some relatives' apartment. He had to leave in less than two months because his family could not support him financially. Upon return to Hungary, HIA tried to go back to stay at the Bicske Centre, however he was refused entry on the grounds that although he had been informed in writing of the consequences, he had left the camp for more than three days without authorisation. "When I arrived at Bicske, I was made to sign some documents but I didn't understand what these were about. I thought they were necessary to get my ID card and for things like that. When I came back from Sweden I was told that one of the documents I signed was about acknowledging that I can't go back to the centre if I leave it for more than three day without approval. I didn't know that, nobody had explained this to me."

- **Poor reception conditions at reception and pre-integration facilities and information gaps**

UNHCR has often witnessed the impact of poor reception conditions for asylum seekers in Central Europe on the integration of those recognized as refugees or persons qualifying for subsidiary protection. "Enforced" idleness, social isolation and separation from receiving communities have regularly been noted as by-products of restrictive or inadequate reception policies considerably undermining the chances of those granted status to find a job, continue their education or vocational training or access adequate housing.

The majority of respondents described their stay at the Debrecen reception centre during the asylum procedure as highly monotonous offering little opportunities to remain active. Respondents had very limited or no access

to language courses (in some cases on an occasional basis by a volunteer teacher), and no opportunity to participate in vocational training or cultural activities. Respondents also invariably noted that there was no possibility to engage in any employment in the reception centre in Debrecen and had little information on what to expect in terms of integration support and services after being recognised as refugees. Without a sense of a future in Hungary, a few decided to leave from Debrecen for another European country completely bypassing the Bicske Pre-Integration Centre.

BYB/male/Somali/27 stayed in Debrecen for five months describing his stay as “doing nothing...no Hungarian language course, no work”. He decided to leave Hungary rather than move to Bicske because ‘ I had to find a way to feed my wife and four children (aged 7, 6, 5 and 4) back at home and I saw no possibility to do this in Hungary’. He applied for asylum in Norway and upon rejection, he moved to Sweden where he applied for asylum again. He spent two months in detention there before being forcibly returned to Hungary.

TSA/female/Somali/21 talked about life in Debrecen as ‘doing nothing, sitting, twice a day eating...I tried to work and was told that my papers did not allow that. I asked to learn Hungarian and was told that it is hard to get education in Hungary. I knew about Bicske but together with others we decided not to move there. I went to Finland to get a life’.

With one notable exception, those respondents who had moved to Bicske Pre-Integration Centre after status recognition described their situation there in bleak terms with sleeping, eating and attending one and a half hours of Hungarian classes per day being reported as the only activities available to respondents.

MEM, male, Somali, 32, never engaged in onward movement to another European country and was the single respondent who viewed positively conditions in Bicske. ‘Why would I leave the country that has given me papers? It would have been disrespectful. Bicske was better than Debrecen. I helped out with gardening and earned some money (HUF 2,400 per day). My social worker helped me and another twelve people to find work in building demolition in Budapest. When I got my papers (ID, health insurance and tax card) I left Bicske and moved to a hostel in Budapest’. MEM acknowledged that it would not have been possible to establish himself in Hungary without recourse to savings that he had accumulated while working in Dubai for many years.

The cumulative effect of lack of services and perceived lack of prospects in Debrecen and Bicske appeared to have contributed to creating a strong sense of hopelessness among respondents. The majority of the interviewees

received regular psychological counselling from the Cordélia Foundation while at the centres. Most of the respondents said they had not been able to sleep properly at night and they therefore had received some form of medication.

Respondents who had moved to Bicske invariably noted having not received adequate information on the type of integration support available to refugees, their statutory entitlements or what they can expect after leaving the centre. With the exception of respondent MEM, they claimed to have received little support with finding employment or housing prior to leaving Bicske. Some of those interviewed highlighted the lack of any possibilities to engage in cultural orientation programmes and many noted that they felt rather isolated in Bicske and deprived of a meaningful opportunity to have any contact with the host community.

DAJ, male/Somali/21 stayed at Bicske Pre-integration Centre for seven months.’ I was not given any information as to what would happen when I leave Bicske: how I could find a home, a job and get trained. I was told that I will receive a one-off allowance six months after I move out of the centre (nb old system). My social worker said that I am supposed to learn Hungarian and then apply for a job. How would I live without any money during the six months before I get the allowance? This was my first chance that I could have a life - a house and training - but the only option seemed to be that I will end up homeless in Budapest. A friend in Germany gave me money and I travelled to Germany to look for a job.

- **Family reunification prospects in Hungary and prospects of financially supporting family members in country of origin**

Family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society entitled to protection by society and the state. UNHCR’s Executive Committee has adopted a series of conclusions that reiterate the fundamental importance of family unity and reunification and call for facilitated entry on the basis of liberal criteria of family members of persons recognized in need of international protection. With respect to integration, EXCOM Conclusion No. 104 notes the potential role of family members in promoting the smoother and more rapid integration of refugee families given that they can reinforce the social support system of refugees.

Four interviewees claimed to have engaged in onward movement as a result of having no prospects of being reunited with immediate family members in Hungary.

A key barrier to family reunification is the non-recognition of Somali passports as valid travel documents by the Republic of Hungary. Those respondents with nuclear family members in Somalia noted having been discouraged from applying for family reunification by other refugees or staff at reception centres.

Informal refugee information networks as well as the absence of any success stories with family reunification among Somalis seemed to have played a central role in determining refugees' decision not to apply for family reunification in Hungary. In one case, this was with disastrous effects as illustrated by one respondent whose children were caught in conflict and died shortly after she was recognised as a refugee in Hungary.

HA, female/Somali/ 26 left her three children behind in Somalia with her mother in order to seek asylum in Europe. After being recognised as a refugee, HA was told by her social worker in Bicske that it was not possible to reunite with her children as Hungary does not recognise Somali travel documents. 'I was in Bicske for ten days and saw that I could not do anything. If I could not bring my children to Hungary, I had to work to feed them. I went to Sweden searching for work. I stayed there for fifteen days. That is when I heard that two of my children had been killed in Somalia. A Somali woman whom I met at the railway station took pity of me and referred me to her sister in Finland which had a company there. I only helped around the house as I did not have documents to work. I only have one eight -year-old daughter who is still alive. I see no way out of this. I think I am going to kill myself'.

Eight respondents in total said that one of their main reasons to engage in onward movements was the fact that they would not be able to support financially their family in Somalia given that they did not have any employment in Hungary. In some cases, the family had sold part of their assets or borrowed money from a relative in order to finance the respondents' travel to Europe. There was consequently an expectation that the respondent will be able to support them back.

AAM, male/Somali/24 left Somalia in 2007. His family sold part of their property to be able to pay the smuggler. His wife and mother still live in Somalia but he has not heard from them since he left the country. After being granted refugee status AAM tried to reunite with his family in Hungary, without any success. "I decided to leave Hungary and go to Norway in order to find a job. I have some friends living there who helped me at the beginning. I applied for asylum and was able to study mechanics. Once they found out that I was already a recognized refugee in Hungary, they sent me back. What worries me most is my family. I can barely survive in Hungary; how will I support my family?" He is now preparing to leave Hungary again. "I should have left before; it's just that I had no money. But now I will leave, and I'm praying God not to send me back again". He is planning to go to Norway again, although he knows that he does not have any chance to settle down there legally.

- **Access to adequate medical treatment in Hungary**

Three respondents claimed to have left Hungary for a combination of reasons including the fact that they did not receive adequate medical treatment corresponding to their medical condition and needs.

AJF/male/Somali/24, a father of three children (aged at the time 2, 3, 4) left Somalia in 2007 after being severely wounded during an armed robbery. His wife and father were at the time killed. Upon status recognition, he was advised that family reunification was not possible because Hungary does not recognise Somali passports. He was also told that after six months in Bicske he will be on his own despite having limited mobility on his arm and suffering from serious abdominal pain due to shrapnel pieces still in his body. He had enquired about being operated in Hungary but was told that he needed to first apply for the health card and go through the procedure. "I could not wait. The bullet was sucking my blood. A friend gave me EURO 150 enough to buy a bus ticket to the Netherlands. I knew nobody there. I applied for asylum and ended up staying in the Netherlands for eighteen months'. During that time, he was operated on the bullet wounds. He was returned to Hungary before having had a recommended second operation to restore mobility in his arm.

HFS/female/Somali/25 has a one and a half year old baby girl born in the Netherlands. She was around six months' pregnant when she arrived in Hungary in November 2007. She spoke highly of her social worker in Debrecen who 'took good care of her.' Upon status recognition two months later, she moved from Debrecen to Bicske. She was eight months' pregnant at the time. She reported receiving no special advice or information on how to prepare for the delivery of her baby at the centre. She further claimed not to have undergone any medical check-up while in Bicske (with the exception of being taken to hospital once due to high blood pressure) nor to have had any regular contact with the doctor at the centre. Some Somalis living outside the Bicske camp collected some money for her to be able to leave the country. Being nine months' pregnant, she joined some other refugees heading for the Netherlands by bus. She asked for asylum upon arrival to the Netherlands although she was aware of the fact that her application would most probably be rejected. She was immediately moved to the hospital where she underwent full examination and the next week she delivered a baby girl.

- **The absence of 'good examples' of successful integration and future prospects**

Respondents repeatedly noted the lack of any prospects in Hungary in terms of access to adequate housing, education, vocational training or employment

or family reunification. Furthermore, the absence of ‘good examples’ of successful integration within the Somali community was also reported to be a key determinant influencing individual refugees’ attitudes as well as choice of livelihood strategies upon status recognition.

OAI/male/Somali/20 arrived to Hungary in April 2008 having left Somalia in 2007. His mother and two sisters are in a refugee camp in Syria. After applying for asylum, he was moved to the reception centre in Debrecen. Life was monotonous there with no possibility to work or study Hungarian. Later, he moved to Bicske, where he spent approximately two months. He reported not having received any meaningful support there in terms of social counselling or assistance with finding accommodation or employment after leaving the camp. He was informed that after six months he will receive a lump sum payment of approximately \$ 1,000 and after that he will have to survive on his own. Contact with other Somalis who had already left the camp confirmed his fears for a bleak future. “Nobody seemed to be able to get a job or a house. I decided to move to another country in the hope of having a better life there. Some Arab businessmen lent me some money and I headed for Finland where I applied for asylum’. He spent one year in a reception centre for asylum seekers, where he attended language courses in English and Finnish as well as some vocational training on IT. He was then returned to Hungary. Without any prospects for work or training and no accommodation, OAI is thinking of moving again to Finland or to another European country. ‘I would rather spend another year in a refugee camp, even if I’m deported back, than to stay in Hungary. In Finland there were much more possibilities than in Hungary, I was attending a vocational training and language courses every day. Here in Hungary, I have nothing to build my future on. There is no reason for me to stay in this country.’

## 5.2. Barriers to Integration upon return to Hungary

### • Absence of established Somali community in Hungary

Other Somalis and to some extent local mosques were reported to have provided a basic safety net for some homeless refugees. Respondents noted that this was on an ad hoc, informal level. When enquiring about the reasons why homelessness seems to mostly affect Somali refugees, some respondents attributed this situation to Somalis in Hungary often arriving alone, without money and having no recourse to community resources in contrast to other refugees from the Middle East or Afghanistan. The Somali community in Hungary was thought to lack the financial and institutional resources necessary to systematically support newly recognised refugees facing integration-related problems in the country. Furthermore, it was noted that there were no known “success” stories of effectively integrated Somalis in Hungary who could act



as anchors for the rest of the community in terms of providing guidance and advice, helping with employment and housing or representing refugee interests to the authorities and other stakeholders.

This situation though might not be confined to Somalis only. The only Palestinian refugee among the interviewees pointed out that his family was in an equally vulnerable position as they cannot rely on support from the Arabic speaking community in Hungary because of their specific background (coming from the Gaza Strip).

TSA/female/Somali/21, ‘Somalis are poor people. Afghans and Arabs have money and businesses and can support others from their community or help them with jobs. Only a small number of Somalis stay in Hungary. Some get help from their families in Europe and have flats. My mother sold a small shop to send me to Europe. I have no family here nor in another European country and nobody to help me. When I was sent back to Hungary from Finland, I was homeless for one month. I sometimes managed to stay in Bicske with other Somalis. I slept rough around Blaha Lujza and Deak Ter for one month. I sat together with some homeless Somali men there for protection.’

SSN/male/Somali/21, returned to Hungary from Sweden in November 2009. “ Since I came back, other Somalis have helped me. They sometimes give me food and let me stay at their places. I rely upon them but we cannot really help each other financially as we are all poor. I go to the mosque regularly and they also help me some time. I do not get any assistance from the government as I was recognised as a refugee in 2007.”

- **Limited or no access to integration-related statutory support**

Upon return to Hungary from another EU Member State, respondents invariably found themselves inadvertently penalized having no longer recourse to limited integration-related statutory support available under certain conditions to refugees in Hungary. It took on average two months and sometimes more before those returned could enrol in Hungarian classes and be eligible for the monthly allowance provided by OIN. Two cases, recognised as refugees in early 2008, expected to soon have no access to free language courses and the allowance of HUF 28,500 available to those learning Hungarian for the first two years from status recognition. Another two cases had already exceeded the two year eligibility period for language support, they were therefore not entitled to any integration related support.

Here, many respondents noted having not received adequate information on their rights and obligations, the social benefits they are entitled to or future prospects in Hungary.

AJF/male/Somali 21, the only disabled respondent stayed at the Bicske Pre-Integration Centre for two months before moving to the Netherlands to seek asylum. As such he was never eligible for the one-off allowance of HUF 171,000 facilitating settlement in Hungary. He was returned to Hungary in November 2009. At the time of the interview, he did not attend Hungarian classes therefore he was not eligible to receive HUF 28,500 available to refugees learning Hungarian during the first two years after being granted status. He was aware that from January onwards, he would have no access to this limited support either. "I feel dizzy all day long because of hunger. Some Somalis give me food once a day and they let me have a shower at their place. I have no money of my own and I cannot work because of my arm. I have no future here so I must leave again." In January 2010, the research team heard that he had left for Austria to seek asylum again.

AAM/male/Palestinian/33 has two children; his wife expected to deliver their third child in February 2010. The family fled from the Gaza Strip in January 2007 and arrived to Hungary in November 2008. AAM complained that there was no possibility for him to work in Bicske and did not receive any information on integration-related issues such as how to find a job or accommodation after leaving the camp, information on integration-related entitlements and on future prospects in Hungary in general. The family did not have the possibility to attend any cultural orientation programmes. 'Even now I don't have information on my rights and what am I entitled to. I know that I have the same rights as Hungarian citizens but how shall I know what rights Hungarians have? When I received the decision granting refugee status the decision maker informed me in short about my rights in general but nobody has explained me in detail how does it work in practice or how can I claim these rights', he explains.

- **Access to community level services (non-governmental organisations, charity organisations)**

The majority of respondents had limited contact with non-governmental organisations providing support for refugees in Hungary. Many were broadly aware of the work of three organisations, the Menedék Association, the Cordélia Foundation and the Hungarian Helsinki Committee which they had encountered during their stay in either Debrecen or Bicske. Respondents were however only in regular contact with social workers from Menedék Association with respect to finding accommodation and employment. Only one of the interviewees had information on the services provided by the Hungarian Reformed Church as she might participate in 2010 in a housing programme specifically targeting single mothers with children. With the exception of one respondent referred to Cordelia Foundation by UNHCR following an interview, no other interviewee received any psychological support at community level despite in their majority having been diagnosed with PTSD during the reception phase.

## • Opportunities of learning Hungarian

Learning the language and having a basic knowledge of the receiving country are basic requirements for achieving independence and self sufficiency as well as becoming part of the local community. They are also means for refugees to regain a sense of security, dignity and self worth. There are a number of factors that may affect the ability of refugees to learn the language or culture of the receiving country including their educational background and familiarity with a classroom environment, age, gender, physical and mental health condition, experiences of past trauma or torture, family responsibilities and economic or housing circumstances.

Respondents noted that there were limited or no opportunities to learn Hungarian during the reception phase at Debrecen Reception Centre as well as limited availability of language classes in Bicske and at community level in terms of number of hours per week and total length of time of language courses (520 hours). There is no specialized language tuition for refugees with special needs (i.e. torture or trauma victims, illiterate or semi-illiterate refugees) nor flexible arrangements in place enabling those seeking employment or working to attend language courses.

At the time of interviews, six out of fifteen respondents did not attend any Hungarian language courses. Two had already submitted a request for language courses and were waiting OIN's response. In the case of another two, the statutory time limit for benefiting from Hungarian language education had already been exceeded; hence they were no longer eligible for this service.

With respect to those attending language courses, the majority emphasised that without access to a secure home or food, they found very difficult to focus on studying Hungarian. Many respondents further appeared to be in a poor psychological condition reporting having problems sleeping, focusing or remembering things. The majority of the respondents claimed that the number of language course hours available (one and a half hours twice a week) was not sufficient to improve their language skills. Finally, one of the respondents noted that he was late several times from the language course due to the fact the he was seeking job during the week.



## 6 Current Situation

### Physical integrity

Despite living in precarious housing conditions, only few respondents reported feeling physically insecure in Hungary. Three refugees sleeping rough claimed to have been physically assaulted. One of them - a disabled refugee with limited mobility in one of his arms due to bullet wounds - was beaten up by a drunk homeless Hungarian when sleeping rough in the streets. The other was attacked by a group of skinheads on the day of the Hungarian National Holiday on 23 October 2009. The third person had been assaulted twice by drunken homeless Hungarians.

One female respondent who slept rough for a few days around the Blaha Lujza area in Budapest claimed to have been solicited for sex by passing drivers in exchange of a place to sleep. She was subsequently housed at a homeless shelter where another female respondent also stayed. This shelter is mainly designed for Hungarian homeless people but there is a section exclusively available for refugees. They have to use however the same entrance and common facilities as Hungarian homeless people who are reportedly often drunk and hostile towards the refugees. The two female respondents reported feeling very vulnerable at the shelter. While they could lock the door to their room, the section maintained for refugees is not separate from other parts of the building. They claimed to experience low level harassment by drunken homeless people in the shelter whenever they were outside of their room. Being the only women there, they were scared to use the shared bathroom facilities at night as did not feel safe (although designated for women only, these facilities were in practice also used by men). They refrained from leaving the shelter in the evenings since that area of the town is generally considered to be unsafe.



### Access to adequate housing

As well as being a fundamental human right, safe, secure and affordable housing plays a critical role in determining overall health and wellbeing and providing a base from which refugees can seek employment, re-establish family relations and make connections with the wider community.

Six out of fifteen respondents stayed in shelters for the homeless, three of whom were at a risk of being evicted as the shelter they were staying was going to shut down in December. Four reported staying at friends' places; they viewed such arrangements as temporary and could not confirm how long they expected that these would last.

Three respondents slept rough at the time of interviews. One of them, was able to use the bed of a friend during the day but had no other option than being in the streets throughout the night. In total, seven out of fourteen Somalis reported having spent some time sleeping rough in the past.

NMA/male/Somali/23, left Hungary after being recognised as a refugee and went to Sweden where he stayed with a friend for seven months. Upon return to Hungary, he was referred by Menedek to a homeless shelter in Budapest where he stayed for three weeks. He then had to move out and without other option started sleeping rough in the streets. 'It was the month of Ramadan and the mosque was open during the night so I was able to sleep there. I was then referred to another homeless shelter. It was dirty and expensive and far away from the centre. I could not afford to buy a season travel ticket so that I could travel to the centre to look for a job and attend Hungarian classes. I decided not to stay there and go back to the streets. On 23 October 2009, I was sleeping near Deak Ter when I was attacked by skinheads. I was kicked in the abdomen and other parts of the body. I was lucky to escape when I came across a police car reporting on a traffic accident. For two days, some Somalis allowed me to stay without authorization at the homeless shelter where they were living so that I could recover. I now live with an Arab guy whom I met in Hungary. I feel safe there but every evening he asks me when I will move out”.

Three respondents reported fearing losing their rented accommodation. In one case, this was the result of loss of employment due to a work-related injury. In another case, the respondent was occasionally employed and shared an apartment with another Somali who planned to leave the country. He feared that as a result, he will no longer be able to pay the monthly rent and other bills and will end up losing his accommodation. He noted that it would be rather difficult to find someone new to share the rent with as Somalis usually cannot afford to pay for an apartment.

The third respondent rented an apartment with his pregnant wife and two children. He noted having encountered major difficulties in finding appropriate accommodation after leaving the Bicske Pre-Integration Centre. This was the result of the fact that many landlords were reluctant to sign a formal rental contract and incur tax liabilities as a result. Nevertheless, it is a prerequisite to receiving the accommodation allowance that the refugee submits a valid rental agreement and receipt of rental fees. At the time of the interview, the respondent was deeply concerned about losing his home due to a three month delay in the process of approval of allowances by OIN. The problem was resolved when the respondent received back payments of HUF 500,000 by OIN in late December 2009.

## Access to adequate food and health care services

### • Access to food

The majority of the respondents reported having one meal per day of mostly poor nutritional value (pasta and rice, no meat, cheap processed food). As a result they claimed to often feel hungry and dizzy or suffer from abdominal pain. Most of the interviewees noted that they share food with their compatriots and help each other whenever they can in particular during the first days of return to Hungary. The amount of monthly allowance (28,500 HUF) was thought not to be sufficient to afford an adequate diet including meat protein. Two female respondents claimed to spend around 40% of their monthly allowance on medication; as a result sometimes they reportedly had to do without food for one or two days. Some of the respondents attending the mosque noted that they took some food from the mosque once a week.

### • Access to healthcare services

Refugees often have added physical and mental health problems to those found within the general population due to past experiences of persecution, trauma and flight. They might experience problems when seeking access to healthcare services because they might not have basic language skills to communicate with healthcare providers. Many of the respondents who had engaged in onward movements had no health card in their possession upon return to Hungary. As a result and until the time a new health card was issued, they had no access to healthcare services. Two cases had to wait for six months until a new health card was issued.

Five respondents reported not to have a health card at the time of the interview, three of whom claiming to have had medical problems necessitating medical examination and treatment. Four respondents in possession of health card had been hospitalized in Hungary.

TSA/female/Somali/21 slept in the streets for one month. 'I was infected with the hepatitis virus and had to take antibiotics as part of the treatment. These were too strong for my liver and I had to be hospitalised for a month as a result. During September only, I had to spend HUF 10,000 on medication prescribed by my doctor. I had very little money for food. I still feel weak and in pain. I am a young woman. I cannot survive this life. It is better to go back to Somalia than to stay here'.

## Access to employment

Lack of basic knowledge of Hungarian language was reported to pose a major obstacle to finding employment in Hungary. This was attributed to what was perceived as inadequate arrangements for Hungarian language tuition and lack of opportunities for meaningful contact with the local community at Bicske or once refugees moved to independent accommodation. Only one of the respondents was able to communicate independently in Hungarian.

AAM/male/Somali/24 is disappointed by his situation in Hungary. He visits the office of Menedék Association on a regular basis, where he has a designated social worker helping him in job hunting. However, as he says, he is very discouraged by the negative responses he constantly receives. 'My biggest problem is that I cannot speak Hungarian. I attend language courses three times a week but this is not enough to improve my language skills. Without Hungarian, I am at a disadvantage as I cannot find employment'.

AAM/male/Palestinian/33 does not work. He only speaks very little Hungarian and understands English. He was offered a job in the black market but he does not want to work illegally. He is registered with the local labour office' however so far he has not received any job offers.

As noted above, most respondents had only completed primary education and had limited or no work experience in Hungary or elsewhere.

HA/female/Somali/26 'I was raised in a very poor family; my family didn't have enough money to pay for my schooling in Somalia. Our neighbour's children taught me how to read and write in Somali, but I never attended any school there. Many of the explanations in the Hungarian class are given in English; I do not speak English though and find very difficult to follow up what the teacher says'.

Many of the respondents noted that refugees have no access to vocational trainings in the pre-integration centre or outside the centre, which could potentially develop their skills and eventually contribute to finding an employment in Hungary. The absence of such support was in sharp contrast to the experiences of some refugees who having applied for asylum in other European countries were given the opportunity to participate in vocational training.



OAI/male/Somali/21 is good with computers; he attended vocational training in IT in Finland while he was waiting for the outcome of his asylum application there. 'I spent one year in a reception centre for asylum seekers, where I was able to attend language courses, both English and Finnish. Vocational training was also provided in sectors that are vital for the economy as well as social counselling on future possibilities for work. Here, although a refugee, I have no access to vocational training, or language courses every day. I have nothing to build my future upon in Hungary. I know that I will be deported back, but I'd rather spend another year in a refugee camp in Finland than to stay in Hungary. There is no reason for me to stay here'.

A small number of respondents were in poor physical and mental health state suffering from many ailments as well as anxiety and stress. One respondent was disabled and unable to perform manual labour which seems to be the only option for the majority of refugees. Another respondent was in a very poor psychological condition necessitating regular psychological counselling.

Respondents living in shelters for the homeless or in the streets faced particular difficulties with finding employment as a result of not having a registered address indicated on their residence card (only the number of the district where they were registered was indicated). Furthermore, five respondents did not have a health card which made it impossible to find legal employment as being in possession of a valid social insurance number is a prerequisite for taking up any (legal) employment.



## 7 Perceptions of Future Prospects

The majority of the interviewees said that there is nothing to build their future on in Hungary; therefore they cannot find a reason to stay in the country. One of the respondents also emphasised that the Hungarian society is not open or adaptive at all, which further exacerbates their already compromised situation. Many highlighted that there is no possibility to work or find accommodation in Hungary whereas they need to support their family in Somalia. Lack of family reunification was also reported to be an underlying reason for wanting to leave Hungary again.

BYB/male/Somali/2, a father of four children still in Somalia has tried to look for work through Menedek and on his own without much success since he does not speak the language. 'I have been waiting for four months now to start Hungarian classes but I have been told that there is no full group to start classes. Every time I try to find a job, I am asked if I speak Hungarian. After I was sent back from Sweden, I stayed for a month in a homeless shelter and then in different places every night. For the last two months, a Somali allows me to sleep in his flat during the day while he works. He is now fed up with me. At night, I just hang around Blaha Luzja square. I cannot sleep at all as I always worry about my children. I am not in contact with them anymore and I cannot even remember their names. I queue once a day for bread and tea at the homeless kitchen in Blaha Luzja. Sometimes friends give me food. I do not know what to do. I know that I am stuck here because of the fingerprints but I cannot study, work and have no place to sleep.

Most respondents deeply worried about their future. Three among them said that it is better to go back to Somalia than to stay in Hungary. Two said that if no change occurs in their situation they will ask the assistance of UNHCR to go back to Somalia.



DAJ/male/Somali/21 was deported from Finland to Hungary in September 2009 after having spent a year in that country as an asylum seeker. 'When I came back, I had nowhere to go. For twenty two days, I slept in parks or in the streets. Sometimes, I spent the night in discos or in internet cafes where I felt safer. During the day, I slept on the beds of other Somalis staying at homeless hostels. I was referred by Menedek to a hostel where I can stay for four weeks. I will have to move on 7 December as the hostel will close down and do not know where to go. I am still waiting for the monthly allowance of HUF 28,500. What will be the value anyhow? In two months, I would have completed two years as a refugee in Hungary and will no longer have the right to Hungarian classes or the monthly allowance. When I look for a job and show my residence card, people think that I am a criminal because there is no address on it. I am asked by my family in Somalia why I cannot support them. If I cannot help, I was told by a cousin to better get back, get a gun to defend the family. If someone asks my name, I just give them my ID card and tell them to check my name. I do not even remember who I am'.

Six respondents confirmed that they would attempt to leave the country again if they had the money and possibility. UNHCR has information that at least two interviewees having left Hungary during the course of the research.

Only one respondent claimed that despite the difficulties encountered, he will continue to struggle to integrate to the Hungarian society and make all possible effort. However, he emphasised that if he does not find adequate accommodation in Hungary, he will be forced to go to other countries soon.









PHOTO: UNHCR / BELA SZANDELSZKY

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