

Update on UNHCR operations in Europe

A. Situational analysis, including new developments

Mixed movements along the three Mediterranean and northwest African maritime routes towards Europe persist, with some 88,700 refugees and migrants arriving to Europe during the first half of 2023. Italy observed a significant increase in sea arrivals, with over 65,500 recorded, a 137 per cent increase from the same period in 2022. Greece saw over 8,600 arrivals, a 51 per cent increase from 2022. Some 2,100 known deaths were recorded along the primary sea routes towards Europe. Movements on land similarly persisted, with over 10,300 individuals arriving or transiting through South-East Europe.

Expulsions, violent pushbacks and incidents of maltreatment continue to be reported by asylum-seekers and migrants along major arrival routes to Europe. While recognizing the sovereign right of States to manage their borders, UNHCR calls for credible inquiries into alleged violations of international law human rights and refugee obligations. Furthermore, attempts by some States to shift responsibility and externalize core asylum and protection obligations, limiting the right of people to seek asylum, remain a serious concern.

On 6 February 2023, devastating earthquakes struck southern Türkiye resulting in more than 51,000 deaths and widespread destruction across 11 affected provinces, which were also home to more than 1.7 million refugees.

Ukraine situation

The international armed conflict in Ukraine continues with no resolution in sight. Ongoing hostilities and unexploded ordinance threaten civilian populations, particularly communities close to the front line. Over 5 million people remain internally displaced, with widespread destruction of housing and infrastructure, disrupted public services and reduced opportunities for employment. The destruction of the Kakhovka Dam in June 2023 and subsequent flooding in the surrounding region exacerbated the humanitarian situation in areas already heavily impacted by the conflict. While addressing urgent humanitarian needs remains a priority, early recovery is underway in some parts of the country. Spontaneous returns are also being seen, with a corresponding demand for access to housing, core public services and employment.

For those who have fled Ukraine, the Temporary Protection Directive of the European Union and similar legal schemes elsewhere continue to play a critical role in ensuring protection and access to rights and services in host countries. As of August 2023, nearly 6.3 million refugees from Ukraine were recorded worldwide, 5.9 million of whom were in Europe. UNHCR surveys indicate that while most refugees hope to return to Ukraine one day, only 14 per cent planned to do so in the short term, primarily due to safety and security concerns. Consequently, support to host governments – alongside continued support to the Government of Ukraine - remains paramount in meeting the basic needs of refugees and facilitating their longer-term social and economic inclusion.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the 2023 plan for Europe

Operationalizing the Global Compact on Refugees

Considering the pivotal role of the private sector in facilitating access to work and self-reliance, and the potential of technology in linking refugees with jobs, steps were taken to establish minimum criteria essential to the success of national refugee employment platforms in support of their replication. In the second half of 2023, a regional employment platform will be established to strengthen the engagement of the private sector with respect to refugee employment, while national platforms will be expanded.

In September, UNHCR, together with the International Council of Voluntary Agencies, hosted regional consultations with non-governmental organizations, bringing together over 100 national, regional and refugee-led organizations from 36 countries in Europe. The consultations centred around the themes of inclusion in national systems, gender equality and the role of organizations led by forcibly displaced and stateless people. Recommendations will inform organizational strategies and priority-setting for the coming years, as well as preparations for the Global Refugee Forum in December 2023.

With a view to expanding third country solutions, resettlement and complementary pathways remain important. As of December 2022, some 23,860 resettlement submissions were made to European countries, with over 21,300 departures, of which 16,700 were to 12 Member States of the European Union. In 2023, 17 Member States have committed to over 29,000 places, comprising nearly 15,900 resettlement places and 13,260 humanitarian admissions. UNHCR appeals to European Union Member States to maintain ambitious resettlement targets and resettle at least 40 per cent of the global target in 2024.

Ensuring access to protection and strengthening asylum capacity

With continued arrivals to Europe, supporting governments in ensuring access to territory, the implementation of fair and efficient asylum procedures, and provision of safe and dignified reception conditions remained priorities. UNHCR sees the European Union's Pact on Migration and Asylum as an important opportunity to address long-standing challenges with reception capacity and conditions facing many countries within the European Union, through more efficient, coordinated and coherent management of asylum systems and strengthened solidarity. Furthermore, UNHCR continued to engage with States and other counterparts, including the European Commission, to identify workable solutions in support of protection-sensitive border management.

As discussions on refugee returns to Ukraine gather momentum at the international level, UNHCR emphasized the importance of returns to being well informed and voluntary. They should be without inducement, including restrictions on access to legal status or rights in host States. Given the importance of refugees undertaking go-and-see visits to inform their decisions to return, host governments were urged to employ a flexible approach towards temporary travel to Ukraine and the need to safeguard their legal status and access to rights in the host countries. UNHCR recommended a coordinated and harmonized response among host States, including when the application of the Temporary Protection Directive ends for refugees from Ukraine, in line with international principles of cooperation and responsibility-sharing.

Facilitating community-based protection

The Blue Dots initiative in States neighbouring Ukraine has helped with the identification and referral of persons with specific needs in 35 locations. In addition, more than 5.3 million people were reached through the Stay Safe campaign in 2022 and 2023. UNHCR has established online help pages for all countries involved in the Ukraine response, which have been accessed more than 6.2 million times (including in Ukraine). A regional contact centre was established in Hungary and Poland, receiving more than 30,000 calls to date.

Safeguarding and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse remains a key priority for UNHCR in the Ukraine emergency response. In the countries neighbouring Ukraine, UNHCR has taken the lead in establishing and coordinating national networks for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse. By the end of 2022, 4,500 humanitarian workers had

been trained in safeguarding and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse, 170 humanitarian organizations engaged in these networks and 46,000 refugees reached with community outreach activities.

Activities aiming to protect lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (LGBTIQ+) forcibly displaced and stateless persons across the region continued. These included interventions to ensure access to asylum and refugee status determination, engagement with communities, as well as coalition building.

Across Europe, UNHCR continued to advance community-based approaches to protection and enhance participation through refugee-led organizations. Thus far in 2023, some 70 refugee-led organizations across the region have received grants from UNHCR, a significant increase as compared to last year when 48 projects were funded.

Enhancing education

Given the ongoing international armed conflict in Ukraine, the inclusion of refugee children and young people from Ukraine in national education systems remains a priority, along with complementary access to remote and online access to Ukrainian curricula for those wishing to also follow these courses. Efforts have focused on advocacy with host States regarding the adoption of longer-term measures to include refugees in national education systems. In order to support this, UNHCR published recommendations for host States for the 2023-2024 school year.

Supporting socioeconomic inclusion

While national social protection programmes are cited as one of the main income sources for Ukrainian refugees and internally displaced persons, legal and de facto barriers to access remained a concern. UNHCR stepped up efforts to address these barriers through advocacy, outreach, information, enrolment assistance and legal advice. Memorandums of Understanding have been established between UNHCR and relevant ministries or local municipalities in Bulgaria, Poland, the Republic of Moldova, Romania, Slovakia and Ukraine, with a view to supporting refugee enrolment and providing technical assistance.

Elsewhere in Europe, the Regional Refugee Housing Programme, implemented in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia has benefited some 11,300 families which were displaced during the 1990s. The construction component of the programme was completed at the end of June 2023.

Promoting protection and solutions for internally displaced persons

As of mid-2023, UNHCR and its partners had provided protection and assistance to over 2 million people in Ukraine and in the refugee-hosting countries. This included emergency shelter and housing, essential relief items and cash assistance. Winterization activities in Ukraine ensured warm and dignified living conditions for over 1.5 million people. Between January and July 2023, some \$127 million was dispersed to meet the needs of some 520,000 people in Ukraine and neighbouring countries. Looking ahead, the operational engagement of UNHCR in Ukraine will continue with provision of humanitarian assistance, with an emphasis on frontline and newly accessible areas. Support for early recovery, particularly in the shelter sector, will be provided in parts of the country where the conditions allow.

Following the earthquake in Türkiye, UNHCR reinforced the Government's response efforts through the provision of core relief items, such as tents, blankets, mattresses, kitchen sets and hygiene materials. By August 2023, 2.9 million items had been delivered to national and local authorities in Türkiye.

Restricted access through the Lachin corridor since mid-December 2022 heightened tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan. To prepare for possible new displacement, UNHCR updated its contingency and preparedness plans and contributed to inter-agency plans. UNHCR remains committed to discharging its responsibilities with respect to the voluntary return of all populations, as stipulated under paragraph 7 of the trilateral statement, once mutually acceptable modalities for access are identified by all parties.

Eradicating statelessness

Significant progress has been made in addressing statelessness across the region, with important legislative changes to reduce the risk of child statelessness in North Macedonia and the Republic of Moldova, while in Portugal, the amended Immigration and Asylum Act provides for the establishment of a statelessness determination procedure. UNHCR will continue promoting and supporting efforts to address statelessness in Europe, in partnership with civil society, regional organizations and persons with lived experiences of statelessness. The high-level conference between the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and UNHCR, scheduled to take place in North Macedonia in October 2023, will provide an important opportunity for further exchange and renewed commitments to eradicate statelessness in South-East Europe ahead of the Global Refugee Forum 2023.

C. Financial information

The budget for the activities of UNHCR in Europe for 2023, as approved by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme during its seventy-third annual plenary session in October 2022, amounted to \$1,293.5 million.

In November 2022, UNHCR established a supplementary budget of \$250.0 million for the Ukraine situation to address the significant protection and humanitarian needs of people affected by the international armed conflict in Ukraine. In February 2023, UNHCR established a supplementary budget of \$150.0 million to provide immediate, life-saving assistance to people affected by the earthquake in south-eastern Türkiye.

As of August 2023, the budget for Europe stood at \$1,693.5 million. At the country level, \$602.5 million (or 54 per cent) of the total budget of \$1,119.5 million allocated to the Ukraine situation is for the response inside Ukraine, with over 6 million targeting internally displaced persons. A total of \$331.8 million (representing 30 per cent of the budget) is allocated to the 10 countries neighbouring Ukraine (Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Republic of Moldova, Romania and Slovakia), which together host over 3 million refugees from Ukraine. Some \$498.5 million (or 29 per cent) is required for Türkiye, the world’s largest refugee-hosting country, with some 4 million refugees of whom approximately 1.7 million were affected by the earthquake.

The financial needs for Europe were currently 54 per cent funded (\$915.9 million) as of 31 August 2023, including an indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.

The two impact areas with the highest budget allocations are “RESPOND: Realizing rights in safe environments” with \$773.4 million (or 46 per cent) and “PROTECT: Attaining favourable protection environments” with \$639.3 million (or 38 per cent), reflecting the significant protection and humanitarian needs of the forcibly displaced and stateless in Europe. The impact area “SOLVE: Securing solutions” has the third highest budget allocation, with \$156.2 million (9 per cent), highlighting work by UNHCR on socioeconomic inclusion and integration. The impact area “EMPOWER: Empowering communities and achieving gender equality” amounts to \$124.7 million (7 per cent) and captures activities to strengthen community mechanisms and gender equality.