

Update on UNHCR's operations in Europe

A. Situational analysis including new developments

The conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic has affected many countries in Europe, particularly Turkey. Since the beginning of the crisis in 2011, Turkey has received 478,700 Syrian refugees, almost ten times more than the rest of Europe combined. The massive influx has placed considerable pressure on the protection response capacity in the country, which has largely maintained an open-border policy and continues to apply a temporary protection regime to Syrians. Many of the new arrivals are being accommodated in refugee camps, but increasing numbers of Syrians have moved into urban areas in south-eastern Turkey. UNHCR has been assisting the Government with the response effort, providing technical advice and addressing the protection and assistance needs of refugees.

In other European countries, asylum claims from Syrians have also continued to increase. Despite important progress in the development of the Common European Asylum System, the protection responses of Member States, including for Syrians, vary, and access to asylum is not guaranteed across the European Union.

Between January and July 2013, some 224,860 asylum applications were lodged in 38 European countries, representing a 23 per cent increase as compared to the same period in 2012. Some 192,360 of the applications were made in European Union Member States. Apart from the Syrian Arab Republic, the main countries of origin, according to government statistics, were the Russian Federation (26,240), Serbia (18,370), Afghanistan (14,800), Iraq (10,200) and the Islamic Republic of Iran (5,860). Germany and France, followed by Sweden and the United Kingdom, received the largest numbers of asylum applications. The western Balkans region has become one of the main migration routes to the European Union.

In Eastern Europe, hundreds of thousands of people continue to live in a state of protracted displacement. Continuous donor support has helped enable durable solutions for those displaced during the 1991-1995 conflict in the former Yugoslavia. UNHCR has initiated discussions related to the invocation of a cessation clause for those who are refugees, while at the same time improving access to durable solutions.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving strategic priorities

UNHCR's programmes in Europe are developed with careful attention to the age, gender and diversity approach, ensuring that populations of concern are consulted in project design and decision-making. Improved protection indicators also support these efforts.

Safeguarding asylum space in the broader migration context: access to territory for persons of concern and acceptable reception conditions

Countries across the continent continue to be affected in varying ways by irregular mixed movements. Access to protection remains challenging for refugees arriving irregularly at land and sea borders, and reports of push-backs at frontiers persist. Sea arrivals in Italy, Greece and Malta are on the rise. Improved arrangements helped ensure the rescue of almost 20,000 persons by Italy and Malta thus far in 2013. UNHCR welcomes the

continued efforts by the Italian and Maltese authorities to rescue boats in distress in the Mediterranean and reiterates the collective responsibility of shipmasters and coastal countries to rescue persons in distress at sea and to cooperate closely in enabling disembarkation. In some countries, inadequate reception conditions and inefficient asylum procedures contributed to onward movement. These challenges have affected, among others, Syrians seeking access to asylum. More effective responsibility-sharing arrangements and strengthened political commitments are necessary to overcome these problems.

Together with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), UNHCR launched an initiative to develop comprehensive protection-sensitive migration and asylum management systems in the western Balkans. Border monitoring continued with countries on the eastern border of the European Union, and a new border monitoring agreement was signed with Slovakia. UNHCR cooperated closely with Frontex, the European Union border management agency, observing and providing feedback on operations at the Greek-Turkish sea border. UNHCR promoted alternatives to detention of asylum-seekers and intervened to prevent penalization of illegal entry by refugees.

Cases of *refoulement* were exceptional but included serious incidents, several involving abductions of asylum-seekers and refugees. UNHCR is also concerned about the risk of *refoulement* in extradition cases concerning refugees or asylum seekers whose claims for international protection have not yet been finally examined.

Building and maintaining effective asylum and protection systems

UNHCR welcomes Turkey's new Law on Foreigners and International Protection, which provides the legal basis for the establishment of an asylum system and will substantially improve protection space for asylum-seekers and refugees.

In many eastern and south-eastern European countries, the quality of asylum decision-making remains below international standards. The *Asylum Systems Quality Initiative in Eastern Europe and the Southern Caucasus* was launched in February 2013, starting with an identification of existing gaps. Helping improve the quality of asylum systems is a priority, and the Office has undertaken projects in several countries. The publication *Beyond Proof* (available from www.refworld.org) provides an in-depth analysis of issues related to credibility assessment in European Union asylum systems. UNHCR also supports the efforts of the European Asylum Support Office to further strengthen practical cooperation on asylum among Member States.

UNHCR has supported standard-setting by courts, both at national and regional levels. In 2013, important decisions taken by the Court of Justice of the European Union, following provision of information by UNHCR, were related to unaccompanied children, limits on detention, and asylum claim assessment based on nationality. The European Court of Human Rights also issued judgments on detention and other asylum-related cases.

Securing durable solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons

Integration remains the most viable solution for the majority of refugees in Europe, but many face homelessness, destitution and marginalization. Through consultation, evidence-gathering, evaluation and capacity-building, UNHCR is working with governments to improve their ability to successfully integrate refugees. A project on refugee integration, funded by the European Union, will pilot an integration evaluation tool and provide recommendations on improving evaluation. Among the areas shown to affect successful integration are family reunification, material support during the asylum process, and the attitudes of the local population. UNHCR's advocacy for better reception conditions and improved family reunification met with success in several countries.

While public attitudes affect refugees in many countries, hardening attitudes and increased racist violence in certain countries are a concern. UNHCR continues to coordinate the Racist Violence Recording Network in Greece, which noted more than 150 violent attacks against non-European Union citizens in 2012, a trend which continues.

Although progress has been made, obstacles to sustainable integration for those displaced during the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s include widespread discrimination against minorities and barriers preventing access to basic socio-economic rights. The Regional Housing Programme continues to address these needs. In April 2013, donors approved the first housing projects. However, the funds currently pledged do not cover all housing needs. UNHCR estimates that some 88,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Serbia still need a durable solution and supports Serbia's intention to develop a comprehensive durable solutions proposal. In Georgia, UNHCR continued to promote durable solutions for IDPs, in close cooperation with the Government. The Office provided technical advice in the re-registration process for IDPs and focused on shelter assistance and support to livelihoods for persons of concern in Abkhazia.

UNHCR has dedicated additional resources to promote resettlement in Europe and to build reception and integration capacities. The European Resettlement Network has been developed, in cooperation with key partners and with funds from the European Union, and its visibility increased. An emergency resettlement project was launched in 2013 to explore the potential of resettlement in situations such as the Syria crisis. Following a call by UNHCR for the resettlement and humanitarian admission of Syrians, several European States have come forward with offers, in addition to 5,000 places generously provided by Germany.

Preventing and resolving situations of statelessness

The number of European States Parties to the statelessness conventions has steadily increased in recent years. UNHCR welcomes the accessions of Lithuania and Ukraine. The United Kingdom has introduced a statelessness determination procedure, and the Russian Federation facilitated the acquisition of nationality for certain stateless former Soviet citizens. Though obstacles remain, civil registration and documentation, as well as the acquisition and confirmation of citizenship, have been improved throughout South-Eastern Europe. UNHCR research and mapping initiatives aim to further enhance understanding of the scope of statelessness in European countries.

Strengthening UNHCR's external relations and mobilizing support for the work of UNHCR worldwide and for persons of concern

The European Union continued to strongly support UNHCR and responded to calls for extraordinary support for the Syria crisis, in the spirit of international burden-sharing. UNHCR particularly acknowledges the Russian Federation's contribution of US\$ 10 million to the Syria operation. UNHCR's private sector fundraising efforts expanded in Western Europe. The Office also undertook awareness-raising activities in many European capitals to raise support for refugee issues and UNHCR's work worldwide. One particularly successful project involved public awareness messages which the Thalys trains in Belgium displayed in June 2013, an initiative which raised €38,000.

C. Financial information

The initial 2013 budget for Europe approved by the Executive Committee in 2012 amounted to US\$ 196.9 million. Reflecting revisions owing to the Syria crisis, the current 2013 budget stands at US\$ 382.1 million. Any funding shortfall for European operations will have a significant impact on the ability of UNHCR to deliver emergency assistance to Syrian refugees and key protection activities, including advocacy and capacity-building.