

Update of UNHCR's operations in Europe

A. Situational analysis including new developments

Over the past year, refugees and asylum-seekers continued to seek international protection in Europe, though movement patterns changed as a result of newly introduced restrictions at both land and sea borders. While arrivals to Italy continued to decrease, the number of people crossing the Mediterranean Sea to Spain increased significantly from May onwards, making this country the primary entry point to Europe in the latter half of 2018. In Cyprus, the overall number of sea arrivals dropped compared to 2017; however, some 8,000 persons arrived by air or sea and applied for asylum. Onward movements continued through South-East Europe, with an increase in individuals remaining in Bosnia and Herzegovina. At the end of 2018, an estimated 9,700 refugees and migrants were reported to be present in South-East Europe, the majority in Bosnia and Herzegovina (some 4,900), followed by Serbia (approximately 4,500).

There was a significant reduction in search and rescue capacity, as well as an increase in the rate of deaths of those attempting to cross the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. It is estimated that for every 14 arrivals from Libya, there was one death. In total, more than 2,000 refugees and migrants are known to have lost their lives in the Mediterranean Sea in 2018.

In 2018, some 12,000 unaccompanied minors arrived in Bulgaria, Greece, Italy and Spain, representing a decrease of 40 per cent compared to 2017. Some 3,500 unaccompanied children, primarily from Eritrea, Guinea and Tunisia, arrived by sea in Italy (around 15 per cent of all arrivals). In Greece, over 1,900 unaccompanied children arrived by sea, mostly from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan and the Syrian Arab Republic; more than 220 were under the age of 14.

During 2018, 38 European countries received some 529,000 new asylum applications¹, representing a 23 per cent decrease compared to the same period in 2017. Of these, 98 per cent (519,500 applications) were lodged in European Union member States, primarily in Germany (151,900), France (89,900), Greece (53,000), Italy (43,700) and Spain (43,000). In 32 European countries, asylum applicants mainly originated from the Syrian Arab Republic (75,000 or 14 per cent), Afghanistan (35,900 or 7 per cent) and Iraq (35,700 or 7 per cent).

Turkey continued to host the largest number of refugees worldwide, with 3.6 million Syrian refugees and 365,200 refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR of various nationalities.

While it is estimated that over a million people fled Ukraine since 2014, 151,000 Ukrainians are currently known to be in need of international protection in neighbouring and other countries. After five years of conflict and continuous security incidents, residents of eastern Ukraine continue to face difficulties, including in crossing the line of contact, accessing public services and receiving pensions. Tensions in the region are persisting, and the situation remains fragile.

¹ This figure is comprised of data from Eurostat (32 European Union and other countries) and UNHCR (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, Serbia and Kosovo (S/RES/1244(1999)) and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia).

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Supporting coordinated regional response mechanisms and frameworks

Discussions on the reform of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS) continue to be challenging, particularly as regards asylum procedures and intra-European Union (EU) solidarity measures. UNHCR has reiterated its call for fair and efficient asylum procedures and greater responsibility-sharing within the European Union. While the CEAS reform could lead to positive changes, until there is an agreement, UNHCR advocates better use of current EU rules and frameworks. This includes the establishment of ad hoc arrangements, in line with EU law, to foster solidarity among States, particularly in the context of disembarkation following rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea. With an increased focus on tightened border management by some States and divisive discourse surrounding the issue, defining concrete protection sensitive and realistic solutions remains a priority.

In July 2018, UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) presented a proposal for a regional disembarkation mechanism to ensure more predictability and a swifter process, followed by relocation and processing arrangements involving all States around the Mediterranean Basin. The absence of such a mechanism continues to undermine the international search and rescue system, which relies on swift disembarkation in a safe location. Despite a number of efforts by States to engage in case-by-case negotiations, the lives of rescued migrants and refugees, as well as the crews of the rescue ships, continue to be put at risk.

Safeguarding asylum space and building effective protection systems

Across the region, UNHCR supported the right to access asylum through enhanced and systematic monitoring, advocacy to ensure protection-sensitive legislation and policy, and strategic litigation. The Office worked closely with local authorities to reinforce the identification and referral of persons with specific needs. It also developed proposals for managing mixed movements of refugees and migrants, including the establishment of accelerated and simplified asylum procedures for manifestly unfounded and well-founded cases that allow for a quick determination of who is in need of international protection and who is not (and can thus be channelled into return procedures).

As of September 2018, the Directorate General of Migration Management of Turkey assumed full responsibility for registration and refugee status determination, including for non-Syrian applicants. UNHCR will continue to support the national institutions to ensure effective access of asylum-seekers to registration as well as fair and efficient asylum procedures.

In Greece, UNHCR and its partners assisted some 10,000 asylum-seekers and other persons of concern with counselling and legal representation. Over 600 people were assisted with legal aid at the appeal stage of the asylum procedure by partners supported by UNHCR. Upon the request of the Greek Asylum Service, experts are providing training and technical guidance to its caseworkers.

The “quality initiative” in eastern Europe continued to support the development of effective protection systems in the region. While national security considerations have led to a decrease of recognition rates in some countries, UNHCR will strive to provide adequate tools to address any legitimate concerns, while preserving international protection principles.

In South-East Europe, mixed movements of refugees and migrants led to an increase of persons stranded in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Despite many having filed intentions to seek asylum, few formally applied. UNHCR increased its counselling services, while ensuring the identification and referral of vulnerable persons to relevant services. Efforts aimed at further strengthening national asylum systems in the region, including the development of a common or compatible registration database, are under way.

Promoting acceptable reception conditions

Reception conditions remain a concern in many parts of the region. In Cyprus, the reception centre has been operating at maximum capacity, while critical gaps persist in the emergency reception facility in terms of access to information and the provision of legal and social welfare services. Despite some progress in the latter half of the year, the living conditions

for asylum-seekers on the Greek islands continue to be inadequate due to overcrowding, forcing many to live in tents outside the official reception and identification centres. Unaccompanied children are particularly affected and are at heightened risk of sexual violence, abuse and exploitation. UNHCR advocates the provision of immediate interim care for unaccompanied children upon arrival and the acceleration of their transfer to the mainland. The urban accommodation scheme managed by UNHCR meets international standards and provides more than 27,000 spaces for those in need. UNHCR continues to work closely with the Greek Government to transition the urban accommodation and cash programmes to national institutions, supporting their capacity to take over.

In Italy, the Government adopted measures to reform the reception system with a view to reducing costs and improving efficiency and accountability. These include the establishment of a two-tier reception system: first-line reception facilities for asylum-seekers for the whole duration of the procedure, and second-line facilities reserved exclusively for refugees, subsidiary protection beneficiaries and unaccompanied children. UNHCR has reiterated its offer of support to ensure that basic safeguards are maintained, particularly for vulnerable individuals. In Spain, asylum-seekers continue to face obstacles in obtaining accommodation due to delays in accessing the asylum procedure and a lack of emergency shelters for vulnerable persons and families. The local authorities are, however, seeking to address these gaps, with support from the national authorities and in partnership with UNHCR.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the reception capacity was not sufficient to accommodate all people in need, leaving many individuals exposed to the elements and hampering access to the asylum procedures insofar as formal administrative residency registration is a prerequisite for submitting an asylum application. In eastern Europe, UNHCR continues to advocate improved reception arrangements and respect for the rights of persons of concern.

Strengthening participatory and community-based approaches

UNHCR is working across Europe to strengthen participatory and community-based approaches. A pilot initiative in partnership with the United Nations Volunteers programme is mapping community-based organizations and volunteer networks in France, Hungary, Spain and Sweden in an effort to enhance engagement and dialogue with communities. In Poland, a baseline evaluation against UNHCR's 2018 age, gender and diversity policy minimum core actions assessed the particular challenges of applicability in the European context. UNHCR expanded its <https://help.unhcr.org> website for asylum-seekers and refugees in Austria, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Turkey and Ukraine. The website, which will continue to be developed, provides information about the asylum procedures in select countries and the rights and duties of those seeking asylum.

Regional workshops on preventing and addressing sexual and gender-based violence took place for front-line service providers in many parts of Europe. In Turkey, UNCHR piloted an innovative multi-sectoral prevention, mitigation and response project to promote livelihoods for women through various measures including language classes, vocational training and targeted cash assistance. An update of UNHCR's report on female genital mutilation and asylum in the European Union was published online, raising awareness and serving as an advocacy tool on this important issue.

Child protection remained an area of focus, with pilot projects supporting strengthened procedures and services for unaccompanied and separated children in Italy, Serbia, Sweden and Switzerland. A project funded by the European Union to strengthen procedures for unaccompanied and separated children in western Europe included the provision of training for guardians, a mapping of services and gaps, reception monitoring, and stakeholder engagement on best interest procedures. The European Youth Initiative fund, jointly launched by UNHCR and the European Youth Forum, awarded 10 small grants to youth-led projects that promoted social cohesion across Europe. In Ukraine, UNHCR and its partners implemented more than 80 community support initiatives in 2018 aimed at strengthening existing capacities within internally displaced and refugee communities to organize emergency response efforts, enhance protection and identify solutions. In addition, close to 60 projects on peaceful co-existence have been initiated on both sides of the contact line in eastern Ukraine.

Securing solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons

Engagement was pursued with a wide range of actors from national governments, local authorities, civil society and the private sector to promote the successful integration of refugees in their communities. This included innovative partnerships to promote access to the labour market and explore the role of youth and sport in integration.

UNHCR worked closely with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on a joint action plan to expand employment opportunities for refugees. This led to a series of employment workshops that brought together potential employers, local authorities and persons of concern in Bulgaria, Hungary and Malta. The “teaching about refugees” educational materials project was expanded to the wider Europe region.

Negotiations on the European Commission’s proposal for the establishment of a Union Resettlement Framework are ongoing, with policy advice being provided. Some of the 20 European Union member States, which pledged over 50,000 resettlement places for 2018-2019, have already taken steps to admit larger numbers of resettled refugees, and UNHCR will continue advocating that other States follow this example. Several States also accepted refugees and asylum-seekers evacuated from Libya, either through the evacuation transit mechanism in Niger or directly. In eastern Europe, resettlement opportunities for refugees were affected by a changed context, which did not allow for the continuation of these activities in the region.

Complementary pathways, including through humanitarian admission, humanitarian visas and family reunification, have also been used by several States in Europe, including Austria, France, Germany, Italy and Switzerland, contributing to greater responsibility-sharing.

Following its adoption of a “Strategy of integration of internally displaced persons and of implementation of durable solutions on internal displacement for the period up to 2020”, the Government of Ukraine finalized in November 2018 an action plan to support its implementation. The action plan foresees, among other things, the elaboration of local integration plans and mechanisms to access temporary and affordable housing. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, with support from the European Union Integration Framework Fund, UNHCR was able to hand over to the Government the management of data on the needs of internally displaced persons (IDPs), returnees and members of the Roma community. Concerns remain about restrictions on the movement of internally displaced persons in Georgia. In the Geneva International Discussions, UNHCR continued its co-moderator role of working group II on humanitarian issues, together with the European Union and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), which examines issues such as IDP rights, returns, freedom of movement, documentation, go and see visits and property restitution.

Preventing and resolving situations of statelessness

In collaboration with civil society organizations and regional institutions, UNHCR continues to assist States in their efforts to find solutions to statelessness. To ensure that no child is born stateless in Europe, emphasis is placed on reforming nationality laws and administrative practices, and on removing obstacles to birth registration. In September, Spain acceded to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. In October, Albania removed barriers to birth registration, particularly for children of Albanian parents born abroad and for children from the Roma and Egyptian communities.

To enhance efforts in identifying solutions to specific statelessness situations, UNHCR worked in close cooperation with governments and other stakeholders to publish mapping studies on statelessness in Portugal and Switzerland in 2018. Several States, including Armenia, Iceland, Montenegro, the Netherlands and Ukraine, are in the process of adopting or improving existing statelessness determination procedures to enhance the identification of stateless persons and to facilitate solutions for them.

In October 2018, the second OSCE-UNHCR seminar on sharing good practices on statelessness was convened in Vienna. In December, the Government of Belarus, the Commonwealth of Independent States and UNHCR jointly organized an international

conference on statelessness in Minsk. The event was the first in a series of regional preparatory meetings in Europe in the lead-up to the high-level event on statelessness that will be held in October 2019 at the annual session of UNHCR's Executive Committee to mark the mid-point of the "#IBelong campaign to end statelessness by 2024".

Strengthening external relations and advocacy, and mobilizing support

Partnerships continued to be strengthened to enhance joint advocacy efforts, mobilize support and resources, and counter negative discourse. The Office published a number of reports, such as its [Desperate Journeys series](#), which show the human face of displacement and continue to attract widespread public and media interest.

As an active member of the Regional UN Sustainable Development Group/Regional Coordination Mechanism (UNSDG/RCM) in Europe and Central Asia, UNHCR co-chairs, together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Issue-Based Coalition (IBC) on Large Movements of People, Displacement and Resilience, which undertakes advocacy efforts. The IBC also aims to support governments in applying the "leave no one behind" principle in the context of nationalizing the sustainable development goals (SDGs) under the "2030 Agenda". In 2018, the IBC supported Serbia as a pilot country through a mainstreaming acceleration and policy support (MAPS) mission, which resulted in the inclusion of persons of concern in the nationalization of the SDGs.

Ensuring and strengthening accountability and integrity

UNHCR and partner staff were sensitized on ways to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse and the importance of establishing complaints and feedback mechanisms through various learning initiatives. Guidance containing a checklist of actions was provided and adapted to the specific nature of UNHCR's operations in Europe.

In eastern Europe, where UNHCR is delivering protection and assistance programmes, anti-fraud focal points have been designated in accordance with the Office's 2017 policy on addressing fraud committed by persons of concern.

Under UNHCR's risk management 2.0 initiative, large operations such as in South-East Europe, as well as Greece and Ukraine, will benefit from the temporary deployment of senior risk management and compliance advisors in 2019.

An improved, centralized system is helping monitor and track the timely implementation and closure of all recommendations resulting from audits of the United Nations Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS).

C. Financial information

The budget for UNHCR's activities in Europe, as approved by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme during its sixty-eighth session in October 2018, amounted to \$833.3 million for 2019. By the end of January 2019, this budget had decreased slightly to \$832.7 million due to a redistribution of activities.

Thirty-four per cent of the budget for Europe was allocated to the central Mediterranean route situation, while 42 per cent was allocated for Syrian refugees. The Ukraine situation represents 3 per cent of the overall budget.

At the sub-regional level, 54 per cent of the overall budget was allocated to operations in eastern Europe, 5 per cent to South-East Europe, and 41 per cent to central, northern, southern and western Europe.

As of 31 January 2019, the needs for Europe were 31 per cent funded after considering the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.