

CENTRAL EUROPE AND THE BALTIC STATES

Austria
Bulgaria
Czech Republic

Estonia
Hungary

Latvia
Lithuania

Poland
Romania

Slovakia
Slovenia

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS

Unlike previous years, the trend was for asylum-seekers to prefer to remain in the region rather than merely pass through in transit. As a consequence, government officials and UNHCR placed more emphasis on developing integration programmes for refugees seeking to settle in Central Europe. As border-control improves, there has been less trafficking, and fewer illegal migrants. With increased numbers of asylum-seekers in some countries, there was also an increase in the number of rejected asylum claims.

Countries in Central Europe and the Baltic States have benefited from a European Union (EU) project under the PHARE (Poland/Hungary: Assistance for the Reconstruction of the Economy) Horizontal Programme to bring national legislation into conformity with EU philosophy and practice (“*aquis*”) on asylum. UNHCR has been a partner in this process, encouraging the authorities to aim for a comprehensive adoption of international standards. A sense of urgency now informs this process, as more countries in the region have joined the so-called fast track group of states expected to join the EU in the near future. UNHCR offices have a liaison function, working with EU counterparts in Brussels, EU delegations in the Central European countries, EU experts in the PHARE programme, and government counterparts.

Kosovo Albanians, who were accepted in a number of Central European countries under UNHCR’s Humanitarian Evacuation Programme, benefited from the experience these countries had previously acquired with Bosnian refugees. Many other refugees travelled independently and stayed as long as their tourist visas were valid. Assistance was provided in conjunction with IOM and UNHCR and, in some instances, by the authorities without international support. The experience with co-operation between ministries with com-



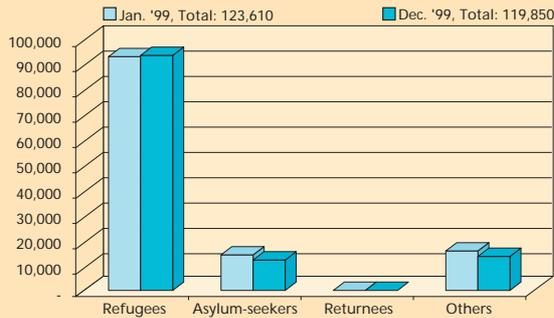
plementary or overlapping remits led a few governments to take more interest in the mechanisms of contingency planning for future similar situations. The presence of the Kosovo Albanians helped to convince a number of states that their legislation should be amended to grant humanitarian status to certain groups. Public opinion in favour of these people led some governments to provide donations in kind to those who were not evacuated. Some donations were channelled through NGOs, strengthening the partnership between government and civil society.

Lithuania, Latvia and the Slovak Republic ratified the 1954 Convention on the Status of Stateless Persons and UNHCR has started monitoring implementation.

CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

The main challenge for UNHCR throughout the region is to ensure the harmonised standards of asylum as states unite. This includes ensuring: access to the territories of states for people in need of international protection; a harmonised pattern of asylum systems which meet international standards; a receptive public opinion; and a decline in statelessness.

Persons of Concern to UNHCR



PROGRESS TOWARDS SOLUTIONS

Strengthening National Structures

National task forces have been set up to follow-up the process initiated under the PHARE programme and are expected to continue after its completion at the end of 2000. UNHCR's offices in the region have supported these task forces, providing advice or participating in their deliberations. In some countries, this process has provided fresh opportunities for government, NGOs and representatives of the judiciary to work together on issues related to asylum. The development of these new partnerships has brought renewed attention to issues that UNHCR had raised in previous years, but on which progress had been slow.

In previous years, considerable effort had been devoted to the development of regional co-operation among NGOs. However, it is now well understood that in-country teams need to be firmly established before regional networks can succeed. In several countries, UNHCR has worked with NGOs to try to up-date national laws covering NGOs, and to encourage the authorities to build provision for NGO funding into that legislation.

In most countries, UNHCR's comments on amendments to legislation covering refugees, aliens and citizenship have been accepted. All countries in the region now have national legislation covering refugees. Although some amendments are still needed, UNHCR

has increasingly concentrated on a small number of precedent-setting individual cases, as has been the practice for years in Western Europe. Amendments to legislation have helped ensure independent first-instance and second-instance appeals, define the concept of manifestly unfounded cases, improve accelerated procedures for refugee status determination, clarify the application of the "safe third country" notion, promote family reunion, prevent *refoulement* and cover the grant of humanitarian status. Advice and support have been given to officials, lawyers and NGOs involved in asylum procedures, especially regarding country-of-origin information. Arrangements have been made to provide asylum-seekers and refugees with free legal advice, often in conjunction with legal clinics established in universities. The development of these legal clinics is being spread to Eastern Europe and may also be taken up in Western Europe, both regions learning from the experience gained in Central Europe. In countries where refugee problems are not high on the political agenda, such clinics also address the human rights problems of nationals and the concerns of victims of domestic violence and other groups. UNHCR has also promoted the use of qualified interpreters and encouraged governments to fund their services.

Capacity-building for NGOs has continued apace, with the emphasis on: improving the quality of protection and assistance; strengthening management (focusing on needs-assessment, objective-setting and forward planning); the sustainability of each agency; developing networking skills and participation in national and regional asylum teams; and fund-raising skills (especially how to diversify sources of funding).

Government officials, NGOs and UNHCR have worked closely to develop programmes for the integration of recognised refugees. The main areas for follow-up are language training, housing and employment. In some countries, this can be achieved through amendments to legislation governing employment and social welfare. UNHCR is reluctant to lobby for special measures, and gives preference to catering for refugees' particular requirements within existing programmes. Special programmes could lead to marginalisation, or feed xenophobic fears amongst those who believe refugees are depriving them of employment.

Training on basic concepts of refugee law has gradually been replaced by work on human rights issues (such as the problems faced by minorities), cross-cultural communication, interviewing techniques,

country-of-origin information and complementary forms of protection. An important development in some countries has been stress-debriefing sessions during which case workers and officials are able to share their experiences of the difficult job of dealing day after day with traumatised refugees. More emphasis is being placed on practical exposure, such as on-the-job training, internships and study visits. Training has targeted judges (especially under the PHARE Asylum Judges Support Project), lawyers, officials, border guards, police, social workers, NGO staff, interpreters, journalists, teachers and schoolchildren. In some national legislation, border officials are called upon to play a key role in asylum-seekers' admission to the refugee status determination procedure. Training has thus received quite significantly increased attention. As the shift in certain countries towards local integration of refugees becomes more apparent, so does the need for appropriately trained social welfare officers and employment counsellors. Joint training has been undertaken with the European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) and IOM. Co-operation with IOM has also covered help for stranded migrants, family reunification and the return of rejected asylum-seekers.

Influencing Public Opinion

UNHCR's public information initiatives in 1999 included several strategies successfully employed in

Western Europe, such as poster/television campaigns and establishing or expanding networks of journalists, while concentrating on themes more specific to Central Europe, such as problems related to statelessness or unacknowledged but institutionalised discrimination against minorities. Target groups included teachers and school children, lawyers, scientists, other opinion-makers, broadcast and print journalists, photographers, students of journalism, politicians and other decision-makers, embassies, local authorities, university students, NGOs, churches, scout groups, human rights groups, refugees themselves, and the general public as a whole. More use was made of the Internet than in the past. NGOs were helped to develop their public information strategies. One of the tasks applicable to the entire region was educating the general public about developments in refugee legislation. Linkages with human rights problems have also been made. Various initiatives were begun, to be followed up during the commemoration of UNHCR's 50th anniversary in 2000, for instance, identifying nationals who were formerly refugees. Special efforts were made on behalf of elderly refugees in the context of the International Year of Older Persons. More emphasis has been placed on information linked to integration programmes, so as to convey the message the integration of refugees is necessary and possible.



Many of the countries in the region have a high percentage of female officials with whom refugee women can communicate more easily. They include doctors, social workers, lawyers, judges and camp managers. A shortage of female interpreters remains a stumbling block, however, and UNHCR started exploring the possibility of setting up pools of interpreters to help several countries as a way of overcoming this problem.

Several of the public information efforts in national education also benefit refugee children, particularly through activities like summer camps. In order to improve understanding between host children and refugee children, special educational awareness kits were distributed to trainee teachers and scout leaders, and scout magazines were given material for articles on refugees.

Voluntary Contributions - Earmarked (USD)

Donor	Earmarking*	General Programmes	
		Income	Contribution
JAPAN			
	Latvia	30,000	30,000
	Romania	120,000	120,000
EUROPEAN COMMISSION			
	Austria	37,195	37,195
	Bulgaria	55,449	58,148
	Czech Republic	51,206	51,659
	Hungary	7,791	7,791
	Poland	22,554	22,555
	Romania	50,411	50,411
	Slovenia	30,874	30,873
TOTAL**		405,480	408,632

* For more information on the various earmarkings, please refer to the Donor Profiles.

** Total funds available for obligation in the region also included unearmarked voluntary contributions, lightly earmarked contributions, opening balances and adjustments.

Budget and Expenditure (USD)

Country	Working Budget*	Expenditure*
	General Programmes	General Programmes
Austria	1,772,946	1,547,546
Bulgaria	954,439	922,782
Czech Republic	865,751	871,062
Hungary	1,386,399	1,170,148
Poland	856,577	816,321
Romania	1,045,270	1,045,247
Slovakia	725,400	682,659
Slovenia	1,674,559	1,649,202
Baltic States	647,108	642,750
Regional Projects	819,400	664,656
TOTAL	10,747,849	10,012,373

* Figures do not include costs at Headquarters.