

Update on UNHCR's Operations in Europe Executive Committee 2005

Part A: Major developments

- In Western and Central Europe, 19 per cent fewer asylum claims were lodged during the first six months of 2005 (compared to the corresponding period of 2004). The 10 new European Union member States reported the largest fall in half-yearly asylum levels. During the first half of 2005, these countries received 11,800 new asylum requests, a 34 per cent drop compared to the first six months of 2004.
- In July, Romania generously provided a temporary stay to 439 Uzbek refugees who were under threat of *refoulement* from the Kyrgyz Republic. UNHCR has deployed an emergency team to Romania to process the group for refugee status and eventual resettlement to a third country. Completed resettlement forms have been submitted to a number of countries which have already expressed an intention to provide resettlement places.
- As announced in previous updates, UNHCR continues to reconfigure its presence in Western and Central Europe (as well as in the Western Newly Independent States) around regional clusters. The regional set-up in Central Europe comprising Hungary, Slovenia, Slovakia and Poland was established on 1 January 2005, with most regional officers taking up their posts in Budapest in June 2005. On 1 January 2006, regional set-ups will be in place for Austria, the Czech Republic and Germany, as well as Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Portugal and Spain.
- Almost ten years after the signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement (GAFP), there has been marked progress in the Balkans in finding durable solutions (repatriation and local integration) for refugees and IDPs. The number of persons displaced by conflict in the region has fallen from 1.7 million in 1999 to 608,000 this year. The remaining displaced populations nevertheless face several challenges that the Governments of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia and Montenegro have pledged to address jointly within the framework of the "3x3" Conference on Returns. The Prime Ministers of the three concerned countries have agreed to meet before the end of the year to review progress and reach consensus on the way forward.
- In the Kosovo province of Serbia and Montenegro, the situation remains tense. Although there has been some improvement in freedom of movement, instances of harassment and intimidation against minorities persist. UNHCR is therefore maintaining its position that ethnic minorities, particularly Serbs and Romas, should continue to benefit from international protection and should not be returned against their will. The Office has accepted the role of Chair of the Belgrade-Pristina Direct Dialogue Working Group on Returns.
- A High-Level Dialogue on Human Security in the North Caucasus – co-chaired by the Advisory Board on Human Security and the Human Rights Commission for the Russian Federation – was convened in Moscow at the end of April 2005. Discussions focused on the potential to develop longer-term recovery strategies for the North Caucasus, which would complement current humanitarian assistance efforts. Conclusions of the High-Level Dialogue have subsequently guided the current efforts by the United Nations to design a new framework of cooperation for the North Caucasus – based on the concept of Human Security – to replace the Consolidated Inter-Agency Appeal Process for Chechnya.

Part B: Progress on Global Objectives and Agenda for Protection

Strengthening the refugee protection framework: Strategic Goal 1 – AfP Goal 1

- UNHCR has continued to advocate for broader burden-sharing measures among EU member States to alleviate asylum-migration pressures on border countries. UNHCR is seeking to have a regular presence in Malta as well as on the Italian island of Lampedusa, where large numbers of spontaneous arrivals are recorded annually.

- Together with the Department of International Protection (DIP) and CASWANAME Bureau, the Bureau for Europe is providing input into the cross-Mediterranean exchange between North Africa and EU member States, and has assisted in the planning of two international conferences focusing in particular on refugee protection and interdiction in the Mediterranean.
- UNHCR has issued annotated comments on each of the adopted EU Asylum Directives in order to support the process of transposition and implementation, in line with international standards and best practice. UNHCR is also providing regular updates and inputs into reviews on the implementation of the relevant Directives and Regulations.
- The concluding meeting of the CIS Conference Process will take place in Geneva on 10 October. Although this will be the last meeting within this process, there is renewed and widespread support for UNHCR to take a lead role, in partnership with others, in maintaining a process and framework for dialogue in the broader European-Asian region to promote cooperation on issues related to migration, asylum and forced displacement (including statelessness, IDPs and Formerly Deported Peoples).

Durable Solution: Strategic Goal 5 – AfP Goals 1,3 and 5

- In Kosovo where minority returns have further declined because of continued tension and the persistent uncertainties surrounding the province's future status, two constructive meetings of the Belgrade-Pristina Direct Dialogue Working Group were held. Discussions focused on a protocol on returns and property restitution issues in the hope of reinvigorating minority returns.
- In Georgia, a verification exercise of the IDP population was completed with assistance from UNHCR and key donor countries, allowing the Government of Georgia to have a clearer picture of the actual number of its displaced persons, their location and their needs. A similar exercise, targeting the returnees in the Gali district of Abkhazia, is also being prepared.
- In Azerbaijan, a joint UNHCR-OCHA assessment mission was undertaken in March and some of its recommendations are already being implemented, such as enhanced cooperation with the International Labour Organization (ILO). The forthcoming final mission report will provide the basis for UNHCR's involvement in the IDP situation in the years to come, in partnership with other stakeholders, notably the Government of Azerbaijan.
- In close collaboration with the Government of the Russian Federation, UNHCR will soon publish a comprehensive information brochure on conditions of return to the Russian Federal Republic of Chechnya, which will include advice and elaborate on each potential returnee's rights and entitlements.

Agenda for Protection Goal 6: Meeting the protection needs of refugee women and children

- A new resource package entitled "Ensuring Gender Sensitivity in the Context of Refugee Status Determination and Resettlement" has been developed and is about to be released as a follow-up to the Regional Analysis of Gender-related Persecution in European Laws and Practice.
- The Bureau for Europe has begun to implement UNHCR's gender, age and diversity mainstreaming strategy for two country clusters. The first cluster comprises Central European countries: Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia and Poland. The second cluster comprises Spain, Cyprus and Albania. Consultations with the refugee communities through participatory assessments will be completed by the end of October.
- The Bureau for Europe is organizing a Workshop on Gender and Age-Sensitive Protection for the countries in the Mediterranean basin, to be held in Istanbul in October 2005. The objective is to offer a forum to discuss regional issues of concern to UNHCR and the countries in the region, such as access to territory, the reception of asylum-seekers and the quality of RSD.

- An overview of UNHCR's activities to combat human trafficking in Europe has been undertaken to analyse the protection offered by national legal frameworks, trends in the emerging case law, and UNHCR's capacities to address trafficking-related asylum claims.
- The "Separated Child in Europe Programme (SCEP)" network of NGO partners and UNHCR country offices are currently working on ways for improving methodologies to assess and determine the best interest of a child in a given situation.