

NORDICS

2002 COUNTRY

OPERATIONS PLAN

Part I: Executive Committee Summary

(a) Context and Themes

The Nordic countries represent one of the most important regional groupings for UNHCR. Over the years the Nordics have been, and remain, a continuous source of political, moral, financial and material support to UNHCR, and to the asylum regime in general. The year 2000 was indicative of Nordic partnership with UNHCR. Nordic contributions to UNHCR in 2000 totalled US\$ 131 million, representing some 18% of the Office's income. As a further indicator of Nordic generosity, and reflecting a longstanding practice, Norway, Sweden and Denmark ranked in the top seven donors to UNHCR in absolute terms. Finland ranked 13th. In contrast to most other donors, Nordic contributions were either non-earmarked, or lightly earmarked which gives UNHCR a welcomed degree of flexibility. In 1999, Sweden introduced a special formula of pledging and disbursing funds at the beginning of the year, signing an MOU providing increased flexibility in allocations that can be used as a model for other countries.

In the field of assistance during emergencies, the region accounts for a significant proportion of UNHCR's standby arrangements.

On the protection front, since 1991 the region has accepted as refugees or granted resident permits on humanitarian or other grounds, to some 289,400 individuals, normally allowing approximately 40% of all asylum-seekers the right to remain. Of the 10 countries that regularly establish annual resettlement quotas, four are Nordic, and Sweden, Norway, Denmark and Finland remain a major source of emergency resettlement world-wide. In addition, Iceland regularly takes around 20 – 30 refugees per year. The Nordic governments and NGOs continue to provide UNHCR with invaluable support in the pan-European asylum debate over the harmonisation of policies and procedures. In 1999, Finland played a key role during its EU presidency in ensuring that in key ministerial meetings (i.e. Tampere) refugee rights took precedence over immigration control mechanisms. When Sweden in January 2001, assumed its EU Presidency, asylum issues were high on the agenda. The Office has every expectation that Denmark will also play a similarly important role in 2002 when it holds the presidency. In the past decade, when the institution of asylum has increasingly been challenged, the Nordics have continued to play a pivotal role in demonstrating a consistent commitment to the institution.

The overarching goal and basic rationale of UNHCR's presence in the Nordic countries is to maintain and enhance this support base and to positively influence the overall direction of national policies, legislation and practice. The Regional Office for the Baltic and Nordic Countries (ROBNC) does this by close and continuous involvement in legal/protection issues while ensuring continued political and financial support by governments, NGOs, the media and the public at large. The Nordic region is not immune to anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiments in some quarters and the tendency by governments to substitute temporary and other forms of subsidiary protection for Convention status.

In the Baltic countries, which have close historical ties to the Nordic countries and are seen as important regional partners, ROBNC undertakes programme and legal activities with special emphasis on a wide range of capacity building measures. In all its activities throughout the eight countries covered, ROBNC accords high priority to gender issues and children in the asylum process.

ROBNC has been able to re-establish, consolidate and enhance its role as a regional resource centre. Old partnerships have been strengthened, and new ones identified and created to promote support to UNHCR, and particularly its protection concerns in the Nordic region, Europe and world-wide. Initiatives have been taken towards private sector funding. The expected positive impact will be felt gradually, with an agreement being signed between UNHCR and Statoil in 2001. Capacity building activities with asylum decision-makers have contributed to a more open dialogue. While major progress across the board on a more liberal implementation of the Convention has yet to be seen, positive developments in the decision making on a number of individual cases and certain nationalities have been noticed. The more open dialogue established with legislators, particularly in the case of Sweden and Finland, is expected to result in an improved consultation process and greater respect for UNHCR's statutory role.

ROBNC will, in 2002, further enhance the role of the Office as a regional resource centre, capitalising on the 50th Anniversary of UNHCR during 2000 and the 50th Anniversary of the Convention in 2001, as well as the EU presidencies, to emphasise the need to maintain a liberal and generous policy towards refugees. The Office will, in 2001 and 2002, complement Headquarters' efforts to maintain, if not increase Nordic government funding level and widen the links with the Private Sector for donations.

To achieve its goals with limited staff and no presence in four of the eight countries it covers (i.e. Iceland, Finland, Norway and Denmark), ROBNC works with a number of Government departments and agencies, NGOs, and legal networks in all countries and in particular with the following specific institutions:

In **Denmark**, the Regional Office's key partners are the Department of Humanitarian Affairs and Department of International Co-operation, responsible respectively for policy and funding in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Also, the Ministry of Interior, which is responsible for asylum policy, as well as the Danish Immigration Service, dealing with first instance decisions and durable solutions. The Danish Refugee Board handles appeals. The Office also maintains close contacts with a number of NGOs, in particular the Danish Refugee Council, an umbrella organisation with whom ROBNC has a formal agreement.

In **Finland**, ROBNC's key partners are the Political Department dealing with refugee policy and human rights and the Department for International Development Co-operation which handles funding, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. On domestic asylum matters, ROBNC works with the Ministry of Interior responsible for policy issues, the Directorate of Immigration dealing with first instance decisions as well as with the Helsinki Administrative Court responsible for appeals. On resettlement, integration and repatriation the Office deals with the Ministry of Labour. ROBNC's key NGO partners are the Finnish Red Cross and the Finnish Refugee Council with

whom it has official agreements. The Refugee Advice Centre is also a very important partner.

In **Iceland**, ROBNC's key governmental partners are the Political Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs handling human rights issues and funding. On the domestic front, the Directorate of Immigration is responsible for first instance decisions, the Ministry of Justice and Ecclesiastical Affairs for asylum policy and appeals. The Ministry of Social Affairs is responsible for resettlement and integration. In the NGO community, the Office's main counterparts are the Icelandic Red Cross and the Human Rights Centre.

In **Norway**, the Regional Office liaises closely with the Department of Human Rights, Humanitarian Assistance and Democracy in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs dealing with refugee policy, funding, emergency aid and assistance. On the protection front, ROBNC deals with the Directorate of Immigration responsible for first instance decisions, resettlement, repatriation and integration and with the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, which in 2000 assumed responsibility for asylum policy from the Ministry of Justice. From 2001, an independent Appeals Board is handling appeals. In the NGO community, ROBNC collaborates with Norwegian Organisation for Asylum-Seekers (NOAS), which provides legal assistance and counselling, and with the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), an umbrella organisation focussing on public awareness and Norwegian involvement in international refugee assistance activities. ROBNC has a formal agreement with the NRC.

In **Sweden**, ROBNC works closely with the Department of Migration and Asylum Policy and the Department of Global Co-operation, both located in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The former covers asylum policy and the latter is responsible for funding UNHCR. The Office also works closely with the Swedish Migration Board, which was previously called the Swedish Immigration Board, based in Norrköping. The Board is responsible for first instance refugee status determination, reception, resettlement and repatriation. ROBNC also works closely with the Aliens Appeals Board in Stockholm, which handles second instance decisions. In the absence of an NGO umbrella organisation, ROBNC works with a number of individual NGOs.

Given the number of countries that the Regional Office Stockholm covers and the absence of a UNHCR presence in half of the countries under its purview, the Office relies heavily on the co-operation of the aforementioned NGOs and other partners.

Despite general language affinity among the five Nordic countries, shared history/value systems, and religion, the region is not a homogeneous entity. Each country has different administrative set-ups and approaches to asylum matters. Moreover, Denmark, Iceland and Norway belong to NATO. Finland and Sweden do not. Iceland and Norway are outside the EU; the other three Nordic countries are members. The Nordics do, however, maintain formal and informal contacts through various fora to consult and work towards harmonisation of approaches.

The Baltic countries are in the process of establishing full-fledged asylum regimes and are making considerable progress in this regard.

A few UN agencies, such as UNICEF, are present in Copenhagen. ROBNC maintains a close working relationship particularly with UNIC. There is no UN Resident Co-ordinator in the Nordic countries.

(b) Selected Programme Goals and Objectives

Theme 1:

Strengthening Asylum

Main Goals:

- Persons in need of international protection will have access to European territories.
- States will develop, and gradually harmonise, asylum systems in conformity with international standards.
- Public opinion will be receptive to the protection of refugees and supportive of their integration efforts.

Principal Objectives:

- RONBC will ensure access for asylum-seekers and refugees to the territories of Nordic countries in order seek protection and, as appropriate, access to RSD procedures and decision-making consistent with UNHCR's protection objectives.
- Ensure harmonisation of asylum systems, related laws and policies in conformity with international standards taking into account UNHCR's protection priorities and points of view.
- Ensure high receptivity of UNHCR's message to support the organisation and provide for the protection needs of refugees.

Related outputs

- Continue to closely monitor practices and developments in the asylum regimes including policy changes that may impact on particular groups of refugees and asylum-seekers. Closely liaise with authorities to share UNHCR's protection positions and advocate for liberal application of protection principles consistent with Office policy.
- Further expand opportunities to share information and engage in dialogue with national authorities and NGO actors to inform the debate on developments in asylum policies and practices. Prepare detailed comments, participate in parliamentary committees and make presentations on law and policy issues, that concern protection, both at the national and pan-European levels.
- Provide informed and detailed information to government, NGO and media counterparts on refugee protection issues. Highlight achievements and objectives of UNHCR's protection strategies in Europe with a view to supporting developments at the national level and as part of the EU harmonisation process. Explore further means of support for UNHCR through PI, media and other non-traditional counterparts including the private sector.

Country strategy

RONBC will carry out a varied number of activities that contribute to the achievement of the above-mentioned goals. These include public awareness raising activities, lobbying and advocacy on legislative developments, policy directives at both the national and regional levels, training and workshop activities with decision-makers, NGOs and other actors, and intervening in individual cases that have precedent value and/or are inconsistent with UNHCR's protection policies. Providing legal opinions

and advice on cases and policy-related issues is another mainstay activity. Specific attention to practices in the area of RSD and how to find a better balance between the grant of Convention refugee and subsidiary protection status will continue.

ROBNC has had an increased role to play on the harmonisation agenda in light of the Swedish and Danish EU Presidencies in 2001 and 2002. Discussions with relevant authorities to help balance the State's interests and UNHCR's broader objectives will further develop under the presidencies and well beyond.

The positive collaboration and mutual support which UNHCR gains from close working contact with the NGO community is a required element in ROBNC's protection and PI/PA activities.

ROBNC will, to extent time permits in view of staffing constraints and other office priorities, continue to be involved in humanitarian training exercises which serve to link the Office's objectives and operational requirements with humanitarian contributions from Sweden, including major peace-keeping and humanitarian operations.

ROBNC will increase its association with academic, policy development and research institutions, both governmental and non-governmental, in order to ensure that the Office's views and positions are heard and shared in a timely manner.

ROBNC will further enhance its catalyst role with regards to the media, by not only providing timely information but also directing media attention to refugee issues, both national and international, as well as to UNHCR's policies.

Theme 2

Increasing Europe's support to refugees and UNHCR world wide

Main Goals

- European Governments, regional organisations and private individuals/corporations will increase their financial support to UNHCR operations.
- The European people will give more and better informed support to UNHCR and to the refugee problem.
- States will actively uphold UNHCR's protection concerns and actively seek solutions to refugee problems internationally

Principle Objectives

- Political support from the Nordic countries for widening the financial support base, in particular related to EU funding.
- UNHCR receives wider private sector financial support.
- UNHCR's role is recognised, respected and widely viewed as relevant.
- The public is better educated on global refugee issues and protection needs of refugees.

Related outputs

- Convincing the three Nordic EU governments to influence EU funding policies.
- Develop a strategy for institutionalising private sector fundraising.
- ROBNC to proactively reinforce HQs efforts to ensure that the Nordic governments have a full, continuously updated picture of funding requirements as well as forecasts of developments which may require HCR involvement.

- Keep governments (including MPs), media, and corporate sector up-to-date with HCR's ongoing attempts to strengthen its management capacity (i.e. we are a good investment).
- Use of PI medium to emphasise to the general public that Nordic leadership in asylum issues is an essential ingredient in safeguarding asylum globally.

Country Strategy

ROBNC will continue its active involvement promoting public awareness of refugees, in particular clarification of the difference between refugees and migrants, combating distortions of asylum issues, focussing on positive contributions of refugees and bringing an international perspective to the asylum debate. Special attention is paid on activities countering anti-immigrant/refugee sentiment, producing films, brochures, newsletters and briefing kits, film productions, concert arrangements, TV presentations, work with editorial boards, press briefings, contact with the corporate sector, participation in workshops, production of material for schools, and grass-roots work at the municipality level to facilitate reception and integration of refugees, to name only a few activities. Many activities will be directed towards promoting protection and generating more public awareness of asylum issues from the 50th anniversary of the 1951 Convention.

ROBNC is constantly refining its systems and procedures in order to function as a real regional resource centre providing support and assistance to its network of partners and other interested parties on all aspects of UNHCR's work.

UNHCR will continue its close co-operation with the NGO communities in the Nordic countries, as well as the regional NGO partners, notably NOCRE/ECRE, for important outreach activities. Similarly, the various tripartite (governments-NGOs-UNHCR) networks will continue, such as the ones for Nordic asylum workshops, Nordic repatriation workshops, Nordic Steering Group for the 50th Anniversaries as well as other topical networks created and maintained as appropriate, are important channels for disseminating UNHCR's concerns. Educational institutions, teachers and academia will continue to be of special focus for ROBNC, providing possibilities to further develop curricula and train the trainer networks.

ROBNC will further enhance its catalytic role with the media, by not only providing timely information but also directing media attention to refugee issues, both national and international, as well as to UNHCR's policies. In this regard ROBNC will enhance its network of Nordic (Swedish) media contacts providing services, which also would include ROBNC prepared information kits, as well as training workshops directly targeting journalists.