



Eastern Europe

Recent developments

At the time of writing, nine Central European and Baltic countries had voted to join the European Union (EU). When they join, on 1 May 2004, the Russian Federation, Belarus and Ukraine will find themselves at the doorstep of the Union. Expansion of the EU will lend increased urgency to the task of further strengthening the asylum and migration systems of these three large nations. In partnership with the concerned governments, international organisations and NGOs, UNHCR has continued to promote the cause of refugees and asylum-seekers as it relates to this westward expansion. In particular, UNHCR is involved in integrated regional activities to strengthen national asylum systems in Ukraine, Belarus and Moldova.

In the Northern Caucasus, a referendum was held in March 2003 as part of President Putin's plan for a peaceful political settlement of the crisis in Chechnya. However, violence continued, and spilled over and into the neighbouring republics of Ingushetia and North Ossetia: a new and worrying phenomenon. Although a relatively high rate of return to Chechnya from Ingushetia was recorded in 2003, most of the remaining Chechen IDPs are still reluctant to return, despite incentives such as promises of compensation for destroyed property.

Armenia
Azerbaijan
Belarus
Georgia
Republic of Moldova
Russian Federation
Ukraine



Most of the displaced populations in the South Caucasus remain stranded after more than a decade. There were attempts in 2003 to revitalise the Abkhazia-Georgia conflict resolution process, but the results were negligible; as were those concerning South Ossetia-Georgia, and Nagorno-Karabakh (Armenia and Azerbaijan). In addition to the IDPs and refugees who remain displaced as a result of those conflicts, the arrival of some 11,000 Chechen refugees, mostly in Azerbaijan and Georgia, has further increased displacement problems in the South Caucasus. The security situation in the Pankisi Valley (Georgia) has improved, relieving to some degree the anxiety among the Chechen refugees there, and allowing for improved monitoring of protection and assistance. UNHCR has developed a strategy aiming at durable solutions for the Chechen refugees in Georgia, and as a first step conducted a profiling exercise to define this group more accurately. In 2003, the children of asylum-seekers and refugees were permitted to attend local schools in Azerbaijan. This counts as a significant breakthrough. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper approved by the Government of Armenia recognises refugees as a poor group with special needs which have to be addressed. The Paper will thus underpin UNHCR's continued calls for their inclusion in national development programmes. By virtue of its geographic location, the region is believed to be used by traffickers and smugglers whose victims may include asylum-seekers and refugees.

To date, little has been achieved for the Meshketians in the Krasnodar Region of the Russian Federation. The problem will become a matter of extreme urgency upon the expiry of the validity of ex-USSR passports at the end of 2003. A joint letter on the subject, signed by various prominent international organisations, including UNHCR, was sent to President Putin, and hopefully this will lead to long-awaited durable solutions for this group. UNHCR will also promote accession to the 1954 and 1961 Conventions on Statelessness and advise on the preparation and implementation of citizenship legislation that is compliant with international standards.

Strategic objectives

UNHCR will continue to emphasise the importance of well-planned, integrated asylum and migration systems as the EU expands and becomes involved with the rapid building of asylum systems and the management of its border with Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova. As part of the Budapest and Söderköping Processes, UNHCR will also assist the Governments of Belarus, Ukraine and Moldova in their increased cross-border and sub-regional involvement in matters of migration and asylum.

In the Southern Caucasus, UNHCR's strategic focus will continue to be on international protection of refugees in the respective countries of asylum. Capacity-building will continue, ensuring that the national protection regime is fair, effective and humane. UNHCR will continue to urge Governments to develop and strengthen national asylum systems.

UNHCR will continue to disengage responsibly and progressively from the provision of humanitarian assistance to IDPs, and from protracted refugee situations. In this context, important elements of UNHCR's strategy in the Southern Caucasus are partnership-building and the promotion of the integration of refugees and IDPs into wider social programmes. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, which all three countries in the region have agreed upon, place refugees and IDPs clearly within the national development agenda. UNHCR will further promote partnerships with national and international actors to ensure that the specific needs of refugees and the internally displaced are addressed. A renewed effort will be made to address property-related issues. Where the necessary conditions are in place, UNHCR will facilitate return movements.

Operations

UNHCR's operations in the **Russian Federation** are described separately in the next chapter. The following paragraphs cover operations in the rest of Eastern Europe.

In **Armenia**, UNHCR will focus on three distinct yet complementary goals: 1) further improvement of the national asylum system in accordance with international norms and standards; 2) further reduction of potential statelessness; and 3) the local integration of refugees. UNHCR will continue to provide legislative advice through its "Gap Analysis", which sets out optimum approaches for further improvement of the existing asylum framework. The Office will at the same time support various capacity-building activities designed to enable key actors within the asylum system to ensure access to a fair and effective asylum procedure. UNHCR will continue to share its legislative expertise on issues related to refugees and trafficking through the existing inter-agency framework. In so doing, the Office will concentrate on efforts to prevent second generation statelessness. UNHCR's assistance activities will continue to focus on health care, social support and community empowerment as well as the provision of improved shelter to the most vulnerable refugees. UNHCR will continue to ensure a responsible transition of these activities into existing and future development frameworks, while at the same time lobbying vigorously for the protection of the human rights of locally integrating refugees.

UNHCR will continue to work closely with NGOs, civil society and the media to advocate for the solutions of refugee problems. UNHCR will work for closer co-operation and co-ordination among UN agencies and international organisations, in particular in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals in Armenia and the Common Country Assessment, including the preparation of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework.

In **Azerbaijan**, UNHCR's main goals for 2004 are 1) to assist the Government to strengthen the capacity of the national asylum system; 2) to ensure that refugees' protection needs are met; and 3) to assist the Government to meet the basic needs of the most vulnerable members of the IDP population. UNHCR will continue to provide basic legal assistance to asylum-seekers and refugees as well as life-sustaining assistance to the most vulnerable. UNHCR will also continue to find durable solutions through local integration, voluntary repatriation and resettlement on a case-by-case basis. The Office will continue to assist the Government to develop its capacity to manage asylum and citizenship issues effectively and humanely, in accordance with international standards. Two additional refugee reception centres will be established at key entry points on Azerbaijan's border. Training is planned for border guards, civilian authorities and local NGOs. UNHCR will co-operate with the Ombudsman's Office in Azerbaijan. Closer work with universities and media is planned. In the context of the Poverty Reduction Strategy Programme of the Government of Azerbaijan and the World Bank, UNHCR will continue its activities to improve the living conditions of urban IDPs, although on a reduced scale, and will phase down its direct assistance to IDPs by the end of the year. UNHCR will enhance co-operation with IOM and the Council of Europe as well as with UN agencies, through participation in the Common Country Assessment and in the United Nations Development Assistance Framework processes.

Given that in 2001 **Belarus** acceded to the 1951 Refugee Convention, UNHCR will continue to work with the relevant officials and institutions, as well as the general public, to raise awareness regarding the Government's undertakings in refugee protection. The year 2003 brought further significant changes, including the entering into force of a new Law on Refugees, which is largely in line with international standards. It is possible that RSD functions will be transferred from the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Thus, UNHCR's focus will be on providing assistance to the Government in developing by-laws relating to the new Law on Refugees and strengthening the administrative capacities of the structures responsible for its implementation. Capacity-building interventions (training, study visits, targeted



CIS. A refugee girl from Georgia in North Ossetia living in a refugee settlement. UNHCR / T. Makeeva

technical assistance projects) and the development of legislative and administrative structures will be implemented in co-ordination with the authorities and will involve all regions of the country. Further attention will be paid to enabling other segments of society (NGOs, the media, judiciary, academics) to play a monitoring role complementary to that of the Government. Emphasis will also be placed on establishing linkages between Belarussian and international NGOs, as well as fostering working relations between NGOs active in the refugee sphere and relevant government institutions.

As a result of progress made in persuading the authorities to accept local integration as a durable solution for the majority of persons of concern, UNHCR's strategy will include activities aimed at improving the mechanics of integration for recognised refugees. Support will be sought from donor countries for funding projects which will identify practical solutions for the integration of refugees in Belarus. Repatriation of refugees will be facilitated on a voluntary basis. When integration and repatriation are not possible, or if protection needs are unusually acute, UNHCR will arrange the resettlement of individuals, on a case-by-case basis. The Office will retain a pivotal role in monitoring how refugees and asylum-seekers are treated by the authorities and how far their protection needs are met; providing direct legal and social assistance through a number of implementing partners still largely sustained by UNHCR; and conducting appropriate public awareness activities to ensure public acceptance of UNHCR and refugees.

The reduction and elimination of statelessness are an important part of UNHCR's mandate. UNHCR will therefore call for Belarus' accession to the international instruments governing statelessness, in particular to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness. UNHCR will help to ensure that stateless people acquire citizenship, and will call for simplification of the acquisition of Belarussian citizenship for recognised refugees.

In **Georgia**, UNHCR's goal for 2004 is to find and implement durable solutions for refugees, returnees, and IDPs, while further scaling down direct assistance to IDPs. The operation's main objectives will remain: 1) to provide life-sustaining assistance to Chechen refugees, and ensure that they enjoy the rights granted under the 1951 Refugee Convention; 2) to promote the right of refugees and IDPs to return to their place of former residence, in support of the conflict resolution processes led by the UN and by the OSCE in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, respectively; 3) to ensure that IDPs exercise their rights as citizens of Georgia; 4) to encourage Georgia to adopt legislation on the voluntary return of formerly deported Meskhetians, and promote accession to the Conventions on statelessness.

UNHCR will endeavour to strengthen the capacity of authorities and civil society to ensure that the protection afforded to refugees and other persons of concern to UNHCR is in accordance with international standards. UNHCR will continue to identify the most viable durable solutions for the Chechen refugees, such as local integration, voluntary repatriation or resettlement. UNHCR will continue to urge development agencies to include IDPs in national poverty alleviation strategies. The Office will promote legislation that would enable IDPs to exercise their rights fully as citizens of Georgia. As part of recent diplomatic efforts to revive the conflict resolution process, UNHCR will help to prepare for potential returns to the Gali district. Basic shelter assistance will continue to be provided to refugee and IDP returnee families. Protection monitoring will continue in returnee villages, particularly in minority villages. UNHCR will also continue to work with NGOs. The precarious security situation in some of the operational areas remains a concern. UNHCR will close its office in Sukhumi but will maintain its offices in Gali and Zugdidi.

Having acceded in 2002, to the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol, the **Republic of Moldova** laid down another milestone when the first Refugee Law entered into force on 1 January 2003. This confirmed the Government's commitment to assume responsibility for refugees and asylum-seekers on its territory. The Main Directorate for Refugees (MDR), which was transferred from the Ministry of Justice to the Migration Department, took on more staff in order to speed up the establishment of a fair and efficient asylum system. The daily agenda of the MDR now covers RSD, the issuance of "protection letters", the facilitation of local integration, follow-up on individual cases, and policy matters. UNHCR will continue to assist in these and other tasks, for instance by providing training and equipment to the Government. Moldova is a partner in the Söderköping Cross-Border Co-operation Process and is receiving financial support for the construction of a Reception Centre for asylum-seekers. In this context, Moldova participated in various training activities organised by UNHCR and the Swedish Migration Board. Although UNHCR's capacity-building activities also cover civil society, NGOs are nevertheless encouraged to seek additional funding from complementary sources. Both civil society and UNHCR play a role in the RSD procedure through membership of the administrative board which considers appeals against rejected asylum claims, and both enjoy exemplary co-operation with the authorities. No cases of *refoulement* of asylum-seekers were reported in 2003. In view of these positive results, and the financial constraints which intensify the need for a rationalisation of its presence in the region, UNHCR will maintain a limited presence in Moldova. With this pres-

ence, UNHCR will aim to facilitate voluntary repatriation and, in exceptional cases, resettlement; it will also raise asylum issues with targeted individuals and raise awareness of asylum within a broader public.

Ukraine is the second-largest country in Europe after the Russian Federation and will be sharing a long border with newcomers to the European Union (Poland, Slovakia, and Hungary). The UNHCR office in Kiev was already a hub for regional activities in 2003 and this will continue in 2004. Kiev is the seat of the Secretariat of the Söderköping Process, established under the auspices of UNHCR with donor funding. Financial support will also help to develop regional activities aimed at strengthening national asylum systems in Ukraine and Moldova, and possibly Belarus, should political obstacles be overcome.

In conjunction with this regional approach, strengthening asylum will remain the primary objective of UNHCR in Ukraine. UNHCR will continue to lobby for new legislative and structural improvements in the asylum framework and assist the Government in their implementation. Specific efforts will be made towards NGOs providing legal assistance to persons of concern to UNHCR through direct support and training in various areas including fundraising capabilities. The Ukraine country programme will also endeavour to reduce statelessness.

Budget (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme
Armenia	1,622,152
Azerbaijan	2,849,143
Belarus	873,267
Georgia	3,824,802
Republic of Moldova	904,897
Russian Federation	11,683,228
Ukraine	2,547,058
Regional Activities ¹	335,000
Total	24,639,547

¹ Includes follow-up to the Geneva conference on the problem of refugees and scholarships for refugee students.