

Central Europe and the Baltic States

Bulgaria
Cyprus
Czech Republic
Estonia
Hungary
Latvia
Lithuania
Poland
Romania
Slovakia
Slovenia
Turkey

Recent Developments

In the first six months of 2000, governments in Central Europe registered more than 15,000 asylum-seekers. This represented an increase of about 1,000 compared to the same period in 1999. The largest numbers of applications were lodged in Hungary, the Czech Republic and Poland. The largest groups of asylum-seekers came from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan and the Russian Federation. Asylum-seekers also originated from countries in the region: Romania (5,300), Slovakia (2,400), Poland (2,000), Bulgaria (1,100) and the Czech Republic (650). While new arrivals from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the Russian Federation were welcomed, xenophobia towards other groups was often manifest.

The majority of the 10,000 Kosovars who had sought temporary protection in the region repatriated over the course of 2000. UNHCR advocated continued protection for members of minorities, such as Roma from Kosovo.

All countries in the region are in the process of negotiating accession to the European Union. The EU PHARE (Poland/Hungary: Assistance for the Reconstruction of the Economy) Horizontal Programme has provided welcome support for the development of asylum systems in most candidate states.

UNHCR will be working in 2001 to ensure that the momentum gained in this process is not lost.

Because of the overall shortage of funds in 2000, the rate of implementation throughout the region had to be reduced in the second half of the year. The process of building the capacity of national NGOs suffered accordingly, as did progress on the integration of recognised refugees.

Strategic Objectives

The 2001 strategy will be articulated around three main themes, very similar to UNHCR's objectives in Western Europe, namely: strengthening asylum; reducing statelessness; and increasing support for refugees and UNHCR world-wide. The approach to the development of asylum systems will be comprehensive; i.e. UNHCR will carefully analyse the legal, institutional and social dimensions of States that are becoming asylum countries. The bulk of funds for the region in 2001 will be used to strengthen legal assistance and integration programmes, as well as to promote the financial independence and sustainability of NGO partners. Advocacy and public information will be treated as integral parts of this strategy. As actual or potential statelessness remains a problem in some countries in the region, UNHCR will take direct and indirect action to reduce the incidence and risk of statelessness, while ensuring that stateless persons enjoy, at the very least, a status consonant with the standards of the 1954 Convention. Although support for refugees in the countries of Central Europe is the foremost priority, UNHCR will establish the relationships and the mechanisms necessary for an enhanced role of these countries in providing political and donor support for the refugee cause world-wide.

Operations

UNHCR's operations in Turkey are described in a separate chapter. The following covers all other countries in the region.

Asylum

Three main goals will be pursued in parallel, in order for Central Europe and the Baltics to become regions providing high standards of asylum, whereby: persons in need of international protection have access to the territories of those States;



States develop and gradually harmonise asylum systems in conformity with international standards; and public opinion is receptive to refugees' needs and supportive of their efforts to integrate.

Access

In order to secure continuing access to the territories and protection systems of States in the region, UNHCR will monitor the adoption and implementation of measures to combat illegal migration and ensure that they contain adequate safeguards against *refoulement* or other harsh treatment. A major challenge will be to encourage States to engage in a comprehensive dialogue with countries producing refugees and/or migrants. The adoption of effective and humane measures to return unsuccessful asylum-seekers will also be promoted.

Asylum Systems

UNHCR will continue to develop a comprehensive network of asylum systems throughout the region. A primary concern is that asylum-seekers have access to procedures in which their claims are heard fairly and promptly. While all countries in the region have adopted basic asylum laws and regulations, these vary widely, both in terms of their intrinsic quality and their implementation. UNHCR's tasks for 2001 therefore include:



having relevant amendments passed; monitoring of entry, referral and refugee status determination procedures; and the training of relevant staff (interpreters, interviewers, border guards, etc.). UNHCR will also lobby against undue detention of asylum-seekers, especially when used as a deterrent. Contacts with ombudsmen throughout the region are expected to be particularly helpful on this issue.

In Cyprus, it is anticipated that the process of refugee status determination could gradually be handed over to the authorities in 2001. On-the-job training of newly recruited staff will facilitate this process. UNHCR will also support the Cypriot authorities in lobbying for coverage by an EU programme, since Cyprus was not included in the first PHARE programme for candidate countries.

The resources of an EU-funded centre in Vienna will be drawn upon to provide training on country-of-origin information for government officials. Savings will be made by using the team in Vienna, instead of setting up such information centres in each country in the region.

An EU-funded programme of support for judges involved in asylum decisions will end in 2000. However, the judges trained in the programme constitute an informal network expected to remain active in 2001. Capacity-building efforts for judges involved in second-instance cases and appeals will also continue. The development of legal clinics in universities, as well as

the incorporation of refugee law into curricula, will serve to strengthen vital academic and professional sources of support.

Such linkages form bridges between government and civil society actors in the asylum system and will be promoted in 2001 and the years to come. The roles of NGOs and the media deserve particular mention in this context. NGOs throughout the region will continue providing legal and social counselling to asylum-seekers and refugees. While many remain heavily dependent on UNHCR funding, government funding for these agencies, which would further strengthen partnership, is continually being sought. Identifying alternative sources of funding for NGOs - and improving their own fund-raising expertise - will form part of the strategy to extend the reach and capabilities of NGOs throughout the region.

The European Council on Refugees and Exiles (ECRE) has facilitated several twinning partnerships between Western and Central European NGOs, which are expected to lead to joint applications for funding and a strengthening of managerial capacity. These partnerships are similar to the efforts by the Danish, Swedish and Finnish Refugee Councils to support the development of local agencies in the Baltic States.

No asylum system can be considered complete unless it provides real opportunities for refugee integration. A study by an independent consultant on integration in seven countries of the region will form the basis of follow-up on this issue in

2001. A number of areas have been identified for further action such as: requiring refugees to have work permits (Slovenia), problems in obtaining permanent residence status (Poland and Romania), a lack of legislation covering state responsibility for integration (Romania and Slovakia), poor access to education (Poland and Romania), a lack of state-funded language training (Bulgaria, Poland, Romania and Slovakia), or a lack of state-funded social assistance (Bulgaria and Romania). The study also singled out best practices to serve as a model for the region, such as: the shortest period of residency prior to naturalisation (Bulgaria and Hungary), co-operation between governments and NGOs on integration issues (Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland), family reunification (Bulgaria), and housing (Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovakia).

Public Opinion

Popular support for protection and integration policies is critical to their success and sustainability. In all countries, public information campaigns and specific events (such as Refugee Day or Refugee Week) will be designed to combat xenophobia by helping the public at large to understand the difference between economic migrants and refugees and to empathise with refugees. In some countries, the focus on inter-communal tolerance and co-existence will have a preventive aspect, for example where UNHCR co-operates with the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the EU to combat discrimination against Roma and other minorities.

In the wake of the PHARE Horizontal programme, local EU delegations have become more involved in refugee issues, and their support will be instrumental in the years to come. UNHCR will seek the support of parliamentarians throughout the region, a majority of whom are increasingly familiar with the relevant issues.

Reducing Statelessness

Accession to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness will be actively promoted. After these have been ratified in a given country, the relevant UNHCR office will continue to monitor national implementing legislation in order to ensure that the letter and spirit of these conventions are adhered to in practice. UNHCR will propose any necessary amendments to legislation covering citizenship. Efforts will be made to ensure that stateless people acquire citizenship, or are offered other appropriate solutions, and that public opinion is supportive of such efforts. In the Baltic States, these efforts will be closely co-ordinated with those of the OSCE. In other countries, such as the Czech Republic, the process is being effectively followed up by the authorities in close co-operation with NGOs, and will require only occasional UNHCR support.

Campaigns to promote accession to the conventions on statelessness involve setting up mechanisms (or ensuring that existing mechanisms function) to identify stateless persons, who are all too often confused with refugees. Few countries have accurate systems to register stateless persons. Surveys will be undertaken to determine the *de facto* and *de jure* situations of stateless persons and recommendations for follow-up will be discussed with the authorities. In some situations the problems of minorities, such as the Roma, are linked to those of the stateless, and UNHCR will continue to work on these in 2001.

Increasing Support for Refugees and UNHCR World-wide

Building upon initiatives to mark the 50th anniversary of UNHCR and that of the 1951 Convention, and raise UNHCR's profile, offices will lobby governments, regional organisations and private individuals/corporations to help fund UNHCR operations world-wide (or increase their existing support). Public information and awareness campaigns will lead to better-informed support for UNHCR and the refugee cause. Promotion often begins with schoolchildren and their teachers. Formal networks of lawyers and journalists are being established and enlarged alongside informal ones, operating through professional groups and 'friends of UNHCR'.

This financial and moral support will be linked to the performance of states, which are expected to act upon UNHCR's protection concerns and seek solutions to refugee problems internationally, drawing upon the Global Consultations to revitalise the international protection regime.

BUDGET (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme
Baltic States (Estonia, Lithuania)	375,000
Bulgaria	1,224,310
Cyprus	431,777
Czech Republic	930,363
Hungary	1,465,029
Latvia	301,527
Poland	808,432
Romania	1,276,673
Slovak Republic	735,021
Slovenia	1,180,869
Turkey	5,622,130
Regional Project ¹	1,425,000
Total	15,776,131

¹ Includes promotion of refugee law in countries in Central Europe and the Baltic States, and follow-up conferences on refugees / returnees / displaced persons.