



Andorra
Austria
Belgium
Denmark
Finland
France
Germany
Greece
Iceland
Ireland
Italy
Liechtenstein
Luxembourg
Malta
Monaco
Netherlands
Norway
Portugal
San Marino
Spain
Sweden
Switzerland
United Kingdom

Western Europe

Recent developments

In Europe, the number of new asylum applications has dropped sharply. According to official statistics, western European countries are receiving the lowest numbers since 1997 (with the exception of Italy for which data were not available at time of publication). In the first half of 2004, more than 26,000 people applied for asylum in western Europe, a decrease of 20 per cent from the same period last year. Only France, Finland, Spain and Luxembourg have experienced a slight increase. There were notable falls in applications from Afghanistan, Iraq, Nigeria, Serbia and Montenegro, and Turkey.

Despite the overall decrease in numbers, asylum remains an extremely sensitive subject for many European Union (EU) Member States. This sensitivity was amply illustrated in the course of negotiations on the EU asylum harmonization agenda, in the number of policy and legal adjustments made at national level, and in the continuing efforts to improve capacity for international protection elsewhere.

In 2004, EU Member States have completed long and difficult negotiations on the two final Directives foreseen under the asylum agenda set by the



Amsterdam Treaty. The Directive on minimum standards relating to qualification for international protection was adopted, and political agreement was reached on the Directive on minimum standards relating to asylum procedures on 29 April 2004 (the eve of accession for the 10 new Member States). Although UNHCR has been strongly supportive of the harmonization process, the Office regrets the missed opportunity to adopt higher asylum standards in the EU in line with the Tampere Conclusions, and has expressed concern that the Asylum Procedures Directive may lead in practice to breaches of international refugee law.

The agenda will need to be set for the next phase in the process started at Tampere, leading to a common asylum procedure and a uniform status for those granted asylum (i.e. valid throughout the Union). In accordance with the Nice Treaty, the decision-making process will change, with qualified majority voting instead of the requirement for unanimity. The European Parliament will have a greater role to play in the process, as will the European Court of Justice. These changes should facilitate the adoption of new instruments in

future and open up possibilities for progress in the direction of a truly common asylum system, as foreseen in the Tampere Conclusions and currently provided for in the draft Constitutional Treaty. In UNHCR's view, this is needed to ensure coherent protection-sensitive management of asylum throughout the Union and to avoid the danger of a competitive lowering of standards for the purposes of deterrence, which is neither in the interest of refugees nor of Member States.

As in 2003, several States have pursued changes in asylum and migration policy and legislation (notably Finland, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom), often reflecting a more restrictive approach towards asylum-seekers.

With respect to efforts to improve international protection and to make access to durable solutions available elsewhere, UNHCR has worked with the European Commission and States in formulating possible approaches and possible pilot projects, especially in areas closer to Europe. Projects to build capacity in south-eastern Europe, eastern Europe and north Africa have been



Switzerland: Refugees often make positive contributions to their communities - here, a Cambodian refugee in Geneva. Who came in the early 1980's and now has her own hairdressing salon. UNHCR / A. Hollmann

elaborated and/or initiated. Discussions have continued on situations lending themselves to comprehensive approaches and the possibility of more extensive use of resettlement, particularly at EU-level, and through UNHCR, while Norway and Sweden have announced increases in resettlement quotas for 2005.

Strategic objectives

UNHCR will continue to support governments in establishing and maintaining national asylum systems which are commensurate with international protection standards, and to strengthen implementation of the 1951 Refugee Convention and Protocol, inter alia through initiatives in line with the Agenda for Protection. Both at EU and at national levels, UNHCR will seek to work closely with the Commission and governments in identifying and adopting those policies and measures that could increase the efficiency of national asylum systems without compromising principles of fairness. At the same time, UNHCR plans to continue to develop approaches which could deal

with the challenges of mixed flows, and the migration/asylum nexus, while ensuring that bona fide asylum-seekers continue to have access to asylum procedures.

As the EU moves into the second phase of building a common European asylum system, western and central European nations have before them a unique opportunity to strengthen collective action. UNHCR hopes that systems can be developed to share the refugee burden more equitably amongst EU countries, reinforcing the right to seek and obtain asylum in Europe through the creation of a common asylum processing system that can yield fairer and faster asylum decisions.

UNHCR very much hopes that the next phase will focus on the further sharing of responsibilities and burdens within the EU and will reinforce the right to seek and obtain asylum in Europe. The "Tampere II" European Council, which is scheduled for 5 November 2004, will be important in developing guiding principles for the next phase.

Given the renewed focus on the plight of people risking their lives to cross the Mediterranean – mixed flows of illegal migrants and asylum-seekers – UNHCR is developing a regional strategy, in collaboration with the countries concerned, which will offer practical solutions within north Africa. This strategy will involve UNHCR's offices in both southern Europe and northern Africa.

On a more global level, UNHCR plans to continue to work with the EU and European States to improve the level of international protection and access to durable solutions elsewhere.

Operations

UNHCR will continue to offer expert input to governments on policy and legislative changes, in line with international norms and best practices, focusing on constructive examples of how national systems could be made more efficient without compromising fairness. This would include efforts to improve the quality of asylum decision-making, monitoring of borders and border procedures, and efforts to inform and educate the public on asylum issues. Capacity building outside the EU, in particular in eastern and south-eastern Europe will also remain an important focus of UNHCR.

As it monitors the EU harmonization process, whereby national legislation and systems are brought into line with EU asylum directives, UNHCR is acutely aware of the risk that the Directives, which set only minimum standards, could be read by States as a prescription for convergence towards the lowest common denominator. To assist States, UNHCR has issued annotated versions of the Directives on Temporary Protection and Reception Conditions, and plans to produce similar editions of the Directives on Qualification and Asylum Procedures, to serve as guides to interpretation for legislatures and courts. UNHCR also plans to provide further input into the development of a new agenda for the second phase of the development of the EU asylum system.

In view of these challenges, UNHCR will aim to improve its capacity for developing coherent subregional strategies to reconfigure its presence in western and central Europe.

Public information, advocacy and partnership

In the context of the asylum debate in the EU, a powerful public information strategy remains central to UNHCR's protection objectives in Europe. Better public understanding of refugee protection, and the difference between economic migrants and refugees, should help to reduce xenophobia. UNHCR will continue to engage more

with European Governments and civil society to make the public aware of the positive social, economic and cultural contributions that refugees and immigrants can make to their host society.

Resource mobilization

Adequate support from western European governments is needed more than ever to help UNHCR to carry out its mandate. Many European States have continued to support UNHCR through funding of its various global activities, enabling the Office to maintain relatively stable finances in 2004. However, most UNHCR country operations in Europe have suffered from exchange rate losses, due mainly to the appreciation of the Euro against the US dollar (the ExCom-approved budget being in US dollars).

UNHCR is also taking a proactive approach to raising funds from individuals, foundations and the corporate sector in Europe. For the sake of impact and efficiency, it has been agreed to focus on a limited number of countries, including France, Germany, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, the Nordic countries, and Spain.

Budget (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme
Austria	1,407,737
Belgium	2,941,480
France	2,096,366
Germany	1,845,343
Greece	1,392,703
Ireland	561,680
Italy	1,663,755
Malta	47,503
Portugal	64,601
Spain	935,878
Sweden	1,744,321
Switzerland	730,203
United Kingdom	1,511,166
Total	16,942,736

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