

## Strengthening Protection Capacity Project – South Caucasus

Update of December 2009

Armenia and Georgia Roundtable on Refugee Protection held in Tbilisi on 16 December



UNHCR hosted a roundtable on the protection of asylum seekers and refugees in Armenia and Georgia in Tbilisi on 16 December under the Strengthening Protection Capacity Project – South Caucasus funded by the European Union. Participants included experts from the Ministry of Refugees and Accommodation of Georgia, Ministry of Territorial Administration of Armenia, UNHCR Armenia and Georgia offices and UNHCR's implementing partners from both countries – UN Association of Georgia (UNAG), Mission Armenia, Armenian Red Cross Society (ARCS), Chechen Refugee Council and Kakheti Regional Development Foundation (KRDF). Starting with presentations and debates in the plenary, the participants elaborated their conclusions and recommendations in working groups on legal and socio-economic integration issues.

In her welcome speech, Ms Tamar Martiashvili, the Deputy Minister of Refugees and Accommodation in Georgia, welcomed the concluding event of the Strengthening Protection Capacity Project by reminding them the words of Antonio Guterres, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, that refugees are not numbers but real people with real needs, and stressed that these needs should be approached from a human rights angle. She observed that her country faces major challenges in cross-border displacement and migration, and its important to share experiences to learn from each other. She also stated that close cooperation with UNHCR and EU is a cornerstone of the progress made in assisting refugees and in building asylum system.

*"Refugees are not faceless statistics. They are real people just like us who through no fault of their own have lost everything. Those who work with refugees are struggling more than ever to meet even their most basic needs." (Antonio Guterres, UN High Commissioner for Refugees)*

Mr Christoph Bierwirth, Senior Protection Officer with UNHCR Georgia, commented that Georgia has made headway in dealing with the legal aspects of refugee protection. Georgia receives refugees from the Russian Federation, which is compounded by its internal displacement challenges. He highlighted the fact that Georgia has taken great steps in socio-economic integration of Chechen refugees. In Georgia, the legal dimension of the integration process will be completed with naturalization.

Mr Martin Klaucke of the EU Delegation to Georgia welcomed the delegations from both countries. Mr Klaucke commented that the SPCP produced significant results, including reception facilities, analysis and improvement of protection regimes, quick impact projects. The event was another output of the project, starting a process of exchange of experience and lessons learnt. He commented that the operational context in the two countries was



not comparable but there were issues of common interest as well as similar methodologies. In Georgia, the main concern since the conflict of August 2008 has been IDPs. It is certainly an area, he said, where significant experiences have been accumulated in shelter and socio-economic integration, which is comparable to Armenian

experiences in refugee integration. He emphasized that there were similarities in the management of displacement challenges. EU has provided funding for such efforts. Mr Klaucke also emphasized cooperation with international organizations and non-governmental organizations as a cornerstone of successful management of displacement challenges. Mr Klaucke thanked UNHCR for the successful management of SPCP project.

Mr Petros Aghababyan, Armenian State Migration Agency's Head of Asylum Unit, stated that taking measures to help refugees was the responsibility of governments, which must be carried out in accordance with their international obligations. Since the collapse of the USSR the succeeding countries had complicated problems which involved massive displacement and migration, in which they received international support, including by UNHCR. Mr Aghababyan stated that Armenian legislation does not fully correspond to international standards, which the government has been striving to remedy with the help of UNHCR. When Armenia faced major flows of refugees, the country had no law to regulate assistance to refugees or material means to help them. Mr Aghababyan observed that major issues included specific mechanisms for implementation of law and cooperation with international organizations and NGOs to bolster and sustain the asylum system and refugee integration.

Mr Stepan Hovhannisyan, Deputy Head of Refugee Unit of the State Migration Agency, observed that the number of refugees constituted 10 % of the total population at one point, which was further compounded by disaster-induced internal displacement and destruction of 80% of the housing stock of the country due to 1988 earthquake. This was a major challenge for Armenia at a time the only feasible durable solution for refugees was local integration. The Armenian government has thus for years addressed the integration option and taken measures in that regard, first and foremost to facilitate naturalisation and housing for the refugees. Ms Hripsime Kirakosyan, Head of UNHCR Armenia Implementing Partner, Mission Armenia NGO commented that, due to aggravated financial difficulties for the Government under conditions of a humanitarian crisis starting in 1988,

social integration of refugees has not been implemented in Armenia. Therefore, Mission Armenia and many others focused on social assistance. She emphasised the role and cooperation of local authorities and civil society in integrating refugees through human rights, including the often neglected social and economic rights.



*Ms Kirakosyan of Mission Armenia said, social and economic integration of refugees is a matter of basic rights, and human rights should be viewed in its integrity. Housing without social and economic rights does not help people to live in safety and dignity.*

The plenary also discussed the progress in asylum system and refugee integration in Georgia. Mr Irakli Kokaya, Head of the MRA Refugees and Repatriation Department and MRA experts briefed the roundtable on preparation of the draft law to harmonise the Georgian legislation with international law and efforts in asylum system building. They emphasised ongoing cooperation with UNHCR and Georgian NGOs, including in refugee status determination, reception conditions and integration of refugees into mainstream public services. Georgia started naturalising Chechen refugees who were already assisted by UNHCR and donors in boosting their self-reliance and community capacities.

Mr Bierwirth commended the Government of Georgia for not neglecting refugee protection at a time when they were tackling subsequent displacement crises. He also observed that migration challenges in the post-Soviet countries were mixed, including return of ethnic groups to the titular states, conflict-induced displacement, migration due to comparative economic disadvantages sometimes coupled with discrimination. He commented that, based on this experience, addressing refugee challenges should be embedded in a better understanding of larger migration management challenges, and refugee protection must be placed in a broader context of migration management.

Ms Khatuna Madurashvili, the Program Director of UN Association of Georgia, commented that NGO cooperation in providing legal and social assistance to asylum seekers and refugees has proven to be an asset to the work of MRA in helping these persons in line with international obligations of Georgia. She highlighted the contribution of Georgian NGOs to improvements in implementation of these obligations in Georgia. Ms Tamar Bekauri, the Executive Director of the Kakheti Regional Development Fund, commented that the UNHCR-supported income generation and community mobilization programs helped a process of gradual transition from humanitarian assistance to local integration within a larger framework of regional development. Mr Ziauddi Idigov, the Head of the Chechen Refugee Council, described his organization's role in building links with the host community. Various UNHCR-supported cultural activities by CRCC are aimed at strengthening the community as well as integrating refugees with the local population.

Armenian and Georgian Government delegations and NGOs decided to seek ways to continue their dialogue, and share experiences and information.

## **Conclusions and major lessons learnt**

Concerning national protection capacity-building, the participants stressed that:

- There is a need for continuing NGO and government cooperation and exchange of experiences and information;
- Further efforts needed to support the capacity of national NGOs, including in a regional framework.
- There is a need for developing legal framework between state agencies and NGO's (MoU between NGO's and government was proposed)
- Social workers should be included in capacity building efforts, including a training program for them on asylum and refugee protection and integrations issues;

Concerning the reception centre management:

- House rules needed for the reception centres in both countries, including improved information for asylum seekers on their rights and duties, rules of conduct, special arrangements for persons with specific needs etc;
- Skilled social workers should be included in the administration of reception centres.

## Concerning refugee integration

- Naturalisation of refugees need to be accompanied by social and economic integration, especially in the form of income generation opportunities and community mobilisation schemes;
- There is a wide range of future challenges, but the core challenge is to establish *sustainable social services*. This can be provided through:

Social needs assessment

Capacity building within the central and local government on social rights and services

Involvement of the local government

Sustainable NGOs

Education of social workers

Adoption of a legal basis for social services and rights

- Strengthening the institute of social rights is linked with the protection of human rights, so professional social work is an important aspect of refugee integration into the wider society.