

## **Update on UNHCR’s operations in Europe**

### **A. Situational overview**

The COVID-19 pandemic impacted population movements within and to Europe throughout 2020, prompting States to put in place containment measures and adapt asylum processes in response to the public health crisis. While the launch of vaccination campaigns across the region has brought about hope, the socio-economic consequences of COVID-19 are far-reaching and disproportionately impact vulnerable populations, including refugees and other persons of concern.

The pandemic significantly influenced the work of UNHCR in 2020. Throughout the year, the Office provided direct support to front-line workers and populations of concern in a number of countries, and shared emerging good practices. Strengthened communication and engagement with communities facilitated monitoring of the rapidly changing situation and the evolving protection risks facing persons of concern. UNHCR ensured that persons of concern had access to information about risk mitigating measures, government regulations and changes in service provision, in an updated and timely manner, and in languages and formats that were adapted to their needs.

The number of new arrivals to southern Europe<sup>1</sup> decreased nearly 23 per cent in 2020 when compared to 2019, from 123,700 to some 95,000 individuals. Notably, the number sea arrivals to Greece reduced by 84 per cent when compared to 2019. The overall reduction in the number of arrivals to Europe can be attributed, in part, to a series of COVID-19-related public health measures taken by States during the first part of the year, including movement restrictions, the imposition of temporary entry bans, the quarantine of new arrivals and, in several cases, the closure of borders. Italy and Spain, nevertheless, saw an increase in the number of sea arrivals, with some 34,000 individuals arriving in Italy (three times more than in 2019) and some 42,000 arriving in Spain (a 29 per cent increase when compared with 2019). With respect to Spain, the majority of sea arrivals were to the Canary Islands, which saw nearly 9 times as many arrivals as in 2019. From January to September 2020, the main countries of origin of arrivals to Europe were Tunisia (17 per cent), Algeria (15 per cent) and Morocco (8 per cent). The number of first-time asylum applications received in 32 European countries<sup>2</sup> in 2020 was 31 per cent lower than the number received in 2019 (461,300 compared to 642,250)<sup>3</sup>.

In 2020, some 1,277 people were known to have lost their lives, or went missing, in the Mediterranean Sea. Although this figure represents a 4 per cent decrease when compared to the same period in 2019, the number of deaths in proportion to arrivals has increased by 25 per cent. In addition, it is estimated that 480 people lost their lives, or went missing, along the Canary Islands route. The capacity of search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean remains under considerable stress, with COVID-19 quarantine requirements further hampering

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<sup>1</sup> Arrivals took place via Mediterranean routes to Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain (includes land arrivals to Greece and Spain) and via the Canary Islands route.

<sup>2</sup> This included 27 European Union countries plus four European Free Trade Association countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland) and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

<sup>3</sup> These figures come from the EASO Latest Asylum Trends.

progress in ensuring predictable disembarkation arrangements. In the absence of the latter, States adapted their national procedures for disembarkation, putting in place quarantine and other public health measures to facilitate access to territory, while mitigating public health risks.

UNHCR welcomed the release of the European Union’s proposed Pact on Migration and Asylum in September 2020, which seeks to foster greater solidarity and responsibility-sharing within the Union and with refugee producing and hosting States elsewhere. The Office is committed to supporting the Portuguese and Slovenian Presidencies in 2021 in advancing negotiations on the Pact through continued advice and technical assistance on the establishment of fair and efficient asylum procedures, predictable disembarkation arrangements and possibilities for new border management procedures.

While many States took exemplary measures to preserve access to territory for people seeking international protection during the pandemic, the increasing frequency of expulsions and pushbacks of refugees and asylum-seekers at Europe’s land and sea borders, often in violent conditions, was of grave concern and placed many individuals at risk. UNHCR continues to call for credible inquiries into alleged violations and for legal obligations to be upheld. The pandemic also had a crippling impact on solutions, especially refugee resettlement to Europe, with only 11,150 departures recorded against the 29,500 admissions pledged.

The second half of 2020 saw an escalation of tensions in and around Nagorno-Karabakh with heavy fighting breaking out in September and continuing until a trilateral ceasefire statement, brokered by the Russian Federation, was signed on 9 November. Consistent with its long-term engagement in matters of displacement in the southern Caucasus, UNHCR strengthened its operational response in Armenia and Azerbaijan to address the humanitarian and protection dimensions of the crisis. Looking ahead, UNHCR stands ready to support subsequent phases of the response, particularly in relation to the ongoing and future return of different groups of displaced populations, as per the ceasefire agreement.

## **B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities**

### *Ensuring an effective operational response*

Across Europe, UNHCR worked closely with partners and civil society to identify needs, employ innovative measures to provide protection and assistance, and support persons of concern throughout the pandemic. Crucially, the Office advocated the inclusion of persons of concern in national health responses, vaccination campaigns and social protection schemes.

To mitigate the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on the livelihoods and employment opportunities of refugees and asylum-seekers, cash-based assistance was expanded, targeting the most vulnerable among them in South-Eastern Europe and the southern Caucasus, as well as in Greece. COVID-19 restrictions also disproportionately affected access to education for refugee children and youth. To address this, a range of initiatives were undertaken to support distance learning, including facilitating access to electronic devices, connectivity and study space.

In Greece, UNHCR worked with the Government to quickly identify and move 2,180 people at high risk of COVID-19 complications to alternative accommodation. Steps were also taken to ensure the successful transition of the “Emergency support to integration and accommodation” programme to the Government of Greece, with 86 per cent of apartments transferred as of the end of December 2020.

In Georgia, following several months of hardship resulting from the closure of the administrative boundary line (ABL) to prevent the spread of COVID-19, joint efforts were undertaken to facilitate access for some 2,300 pensioners from Gali to pensions and essential medicines, by way of a humanitarian corridor across the Enguri bridge. Pending a more general opening of the ABL in 2021, UNHCR plans to offer similar support to facilitate access to disability benefits.

In Ukraine, COVID-19-related restrictions on movement across the contact line worsened the situation for people living on both sides, separating families and deepening economic hardship. Despite operational challenges, UNHCR continued to support affected populations through the

provision of legal assistance and cash transfers to meet basic needs. In non-government-controlled areas, shelter repair continued, as did community-based protection activities. In line with its multi-year strategy, UNHCR completed the transfer of shelter activities in the government-controlled areas to the municipal authorities. Looking ahead, the Office will remain engaged in the key sectors of protection and shelter in support of IDPs and conflict-affected individuals, with a focus on those residing in non-government-controlled areas and around the contact line.

At the end of 2020, operational engagement in Armenia and Azerbaijan, in support of government responses to the humanitarian needs of displaced people, were scaled up. UNHCR continues to provide humanitarian assistance and legal advice through its national partners to several thousand people in both Armenia and Azerbaijan who have been displaced by the recent conflict.

*Safeguarding asylum space and building effective protection systems, including in the context of mixed movements*

While there were severe restrictions affecting access across the continent at the start of the pandemic, adjustments were made as systems were tested and put in place to mitigate the effects of the continuing pandemic. Measures taken by many States reaffirmed a strong commitment to ensuring continued access to asylum in Europe and demonstrated that public health considerations can be addressed while maintaining access to territory for asylum-seekers, including in the context of search and rescue, and disembarkation. States drew on the multitude of good practices gained during earlier months, resulting in fewer disruptions to asylum systems and procedures later in the year. UNHCR has put together a [compilation of these good practices](#), including the increased use of remote interviewing, to guide States across the continent.

In some countries, however, COVID-19 compounded existing challenges in the overall functioning of asylum systems, particularly in regions experiencing mixed population flows, such as South-East Europe. UNHCR continues to provide practical guidance to States in implementing fair and fast asylum procedures in support of the effective management of mixed movements. Ensuring direct access to protection in Europe, in line with international obligations, remains of critical importance, while pushbacks at the external borders of the European Union, restrictions at land borders, and ongoing obstacles to rescue at sea operations remain of grave concern and should be properly investigated.

UNHCR has continued to facilitate the work of the Asylum Capacity Support Group, which was formally launched during the Global Refugee Forum in December 2019. This includes efforts to match requests for asylum capacity support with offers of technical, material and financial assistance. To date, several European States have indicated their interest in contributing to the Group.

Looking ahead, the Office will roll out a revised regional strategy on mixed movements in South-East Europe, with a focus on supporting national authorities in gradually shifting from a region of transit and humanitarian response, to one that offers both protection and solutions to third country nationals in need of international protection.

*Reforming the Common European Asylum System and strengthening the collective European response*

The Global Compact on Refugees reflects the political will and commitment of the international community to strengthened cooperation and solidarity with refugees and host communities. UNHCR welcomes the European Union's proposed Pact on Migration and Asylum, which reflects the core aspirations of the Global Compact on Refugees and underscores clear recognition of the importance of responsibility-sharing and addressing the root causes of displacement. Specific provisions of the Compact provide for independent border monitoring in support of compliance with legal obligations and respect of fundamental rights, enhanced legal pathways and access to family reunification, and measures to improve the efficiency of returns for persons found not to be in need of international protection.

UNHCR remains concerned about sub-standard reception conditions in several States, particularly long-standing challenges of inadequate and overcrowded accommodation, limited staff capacity, lack of basic services, and insufficient identification and response mechanisms

for people with specific needs. This is compounded by the need to ensure that appropriate health measures are in place to protect persons of concern from COVID-19. In locations where national public health responses resulted in an increase in the use of detention or closed facilities, UNHCR provided technical advice, material assistance and guidance on alternatives to detention, derived from good practice elsewhere in the region.

Support to improve hygiene and living conditions at reception centres was provided in Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta and Spain. The Office also strengthened its capacity in the Canary Islands to support the authorities with the reception of increasing numbers of new arrivals, many of whom have international protection needs.

#### *Strengthening participatory and community-based approaches*

In response to COVID-19, refugee volunteers, outreach workers and refugee-led organizations in Europe have been essential in the development, translation and dissemination of prevention and hygiene messages, and in ensuring that the most vulnerable groups and individuals continue to have access to updated, timely and accurate information.

The exponential increase in information needs among persons of concern as a result of the pandemic has led European States, UNHCR, and its partners to expand existing communication channels and to develop new and innovative approaches, such as the use of SMS messaging, social media and various online platforms. For instance, in Turkey, more than 11,200 persons of concern are receiving information via WhatsApp. In Italy, COVID-19 information pages were introduced in the “JUMA Refugees Map Services” portal, recording more than 130,000 visits in 2020. WhatsApp and Viber groups were used by UNHCR and its partners as communication channels to reach affected communities in Georgia, Malta, Montenegro and the Republic of Moldova, and in Ukraine, a telegram channel was launched by a UNHCR partner to share daily government updates in six different languages on COVID-19 with persons of concern.

UNHCR and its partners continued to conduct participatory assessments with persons of concern across the region, including through online or digital formats where physical distancing and other public health measures did not allow for in-person assessments. Online surveys on the impact of COVID-19 were conducted by UNHCR in North Macedonia and Spain, and a number of key informant interviews were conducted by UNHCR and its partners across Central Europe.

#### *Securing solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons*

The new “Action plan for integration and inclusion 2021-2027”, recently released by the European Commission, provides a framework for the systematic engagement of refugees in the development of meaningful integration initiatives and innovative housing solutions, while strengthening effective access to decent work, health services and education. As part of the broad-based public consultations, which included refugees and migrants, UNHCR shared recommendations with the Commission and stands ready to support its implementation at the regional, national and local levels. The four strategic areas of focus of the new action plan – namely, access to healthcare, housing, livelihoods and education – are welcome, and UNHCR urges the European Union to ensure dedicated funding to advance these objectives and to ensure equal access of persons of concern to national social protection systems.

Throughout the pandemic, refugees and other persons of concern contributed their time and skills to the response in various ways, such as producing masks, collecting groceries for the elderly, and many with medical qualifications supported national health responses. Seven European countries publicly requested foreign-born doctors and nurses to identify themselves and help with the national response, and many refugees came forward, in solidarity with their host countries. UNHCR worked closely with the Council of Europe and national recognition boards to identify refugee health workers and have their qualifications assessed through the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees initiative.

The pandemic had a significant impact on refugee resettlement to the European Union in 2020, with only 11,150 departures recorded against the 29,500 admissions pledged. This low implementation rate led the European Commission to extend the pledging exercise to a two-year programme (2020-2021). The efforts of certain member States to resume resettlement in

the second half of 2020, through the adoption of new ways of working, including remote interviewing and dossier-based processing, provided a concrete demonstration of European solidarity.

Following the European Commission's call on EU member States to support the relocation of unaccompanied children living in precarious conditions on the Greek islands by December 2020, 16 countries pledged a total of 1,587 places for unaccompanied children, and a further 3,288 place for other vulnerable persons. By mid-January 2021, 583 unaccompanied children had been relocated to Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Portugal. In addition, France, Germany, Luxembourg and the Netherlands received 1,643 vulnerable individuals. UNHCR has been closely coordinating the relocation exercise with the Greek Government, the European Asylum Support Office, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Relocation following search and rescue operations has also taken place from Cyprus, Italy and Malta, with 860 places pledged by the Governments of Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg and Portugal, and 298 transfers having taken place thus far.

#### *Preventing and resolving situations of statelessness*

Out of the 40 pledges made by 14 European States at the high-level segment on statelessness, which was held in October 2019 during the seventieth session of the Executive Committee, six were fulfilled as of the end of 2020. Significant progress has been made on other key commitments which are expected to materialize in 2021. Following the accession of Malta and North Macedonia to the 1954 and 1961 statelessness conventions as pledged, Iceland became a State party to both in January 2021 and had already fully aligned its national legal framework with the standards set out in the two conventions at the time of accession.

An in-depth review of the statelessness determination procedures of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, established in 2013, was carried out under the "quality protection partnership", a joint initiative of the Government and UNHCR. This review, aimed at improving the quality of the decision-making process, was published in December 2020.

Important steps were also taken by Croatia, the Czech Republic and Denmark in 2020 to implement initiatives focused on improving data and information available on statelessness, with dedicated mapping studies and legal analyses subsequently published.

#### *Strengthening external engagement and advocacy, and mobilizing support*

Working closely with a range of external stakeholders, UNHCR continued to utilize communication and advocacy tools in support of protection and solutions in Europe, and to challenge anti-refugee sentiment, misperceptions and stereotypes regarding refugees and asylum-seekers in Europe. Partnerships with a range of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as faith-based and refugee-led organizations, were also strengthened. Five regional dialogues between UNHCR and NGOs were jointly organized with the European Council on Refugees and Exiles, and the International Council of Voluntary Agencies to foster exchange of information and discuss complementary advocacy efforts.

UNHCR continued to build on its close partnerships with IOM and UNICEF throughout the year. In Italy, a "pocket guide" with information about services to prevent and respond to gender-based violence was launched by the three organizations, while in Greece close coordination led to the operationalization of the relocation scheme for unaccompanied children. At the regional level, inter-agency collaboration continued on various fronts, including the development of a factsheet on the protection of refugee and migrant children, as well as the compilation of statistics for the relocation scheme from Greece. The Office commends these and the numerous other demonstrations of solidarity and support for refugees and other persons of concern in the region.

UNHCR supported the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework to ensure that "no one is left behind", including refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless people. As co-chair, together with IOM, of the Issue-based Coalition on Large Movements of People, Displacement and Resilience for Europe and Central Asia, in which the regional United Nations Network on Migration is embedded, UNHCR helped organize the first regional review

of the implementation of the Global Compact for Migration, with the aim of ensuring that refugee protection space is preserved.

### **C. Financial information**

The budget for UNHCR’s activities in Europe for 2021, as approved by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme during its seventy-first session in October 2020, amounted to \$709.3 million.

By the end of January 2021, the budget had been revised to \$694.9 million, owing to a decrease in the budget for Greece to reflect the transition of the “Emergency support to integration and accommodation” programme to the Government as of the end of December 2020.

At the sub-regional level, 60 per cent of the overall budget is allocated to operations in eastern Europe, which includes Turkey and Ukraine. Five per cent is allocated to south-eastern Europe, and 31 per cent to central, northern, southern and western Europe, which includes Greece. Four per cent of the budget is allocated to region-wide activities, comprising the Regional Bureau’s budget.

Of the overall budget for the region, the Syria situation represents 44 per cent and the central Mediterranean situation 18 per cent.

As of February 2021, the financial needs for Europe of \$694.9 million were 17 per cent funded, when considering the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.

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