



COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN

OVERVIEW

Country: Benelux

Planning Year: 2006

2006 OPERATIONS PLAN REGIONAL REPRESENTATION IN BRUSSELS

Part I: OVERVIEW

1. Protection and the socio-economic and political environment

The Regional Representation in Brussels is responsible for UNHCR's activities in the Benelux countries and for cooperation with the European Institutions. In the Benelux, as well as at the European Union level, the topic of migration remains high on the political agenda, and encompasses questions concerning refugees, asylum-seekers, legal and illegal migration and return. Experience has shown that asylum and immigration are issues on which governments can stand or fall. Asylum-seekers and refugees arriving in Europe are part of broader migratory flows, and UNHCR's voice must be heard in the debate on migration, in order to highlight the special protection needs of refugees.

With few legal channels for entry to Europe, both asylum seekers and irregular migrants resort to irregular means. Many would-be migrants apply for asylum in an effort to regularize their stay. States face the challenge of having to reconcile legitimate border control concerns with international legal obligations to protect refugees. At the end of a long process, which varies in quality from State to State, on average just under half of those who ask for protection are allowed to remain. However, governments often face difficulties in removing those whose claims are rejected, and this feeds the belief that governments have lost control over their borders. This negative perception is exacerbated by difficulties with the integration of third country nationals. Moreover, irregular movements are increasingly seen through the lens of security and social cohesion. This can lead to heightened hostility to migrants.

The EU has the declared goal of establishing a common European asylum system by 2010. UNHCR's advice and support in this process is essential. However, it remains to be seen whether Member States will agree to set up a fully-fledged EU asylum system, or whether they will resist going beyond the setting of common standards.

With this background, it is not surprising that the EU and its Member States are concentrating increasingly on the external dimension of refugee policy. If protection and access to durable solutions can be improved in the regions from which refugees originate, governments reason, it will not be necessary for refugees to move onward to the EU. However, in UNHCR's view, the building of protection capacity outside the EU must be a complement to and not a substitute for protection within the EU. A clear distinction has to be maintained between strengthening refugee protection outside the EU, which is a goal UNHCR shares, and externalizing the EU's responsibilities, which we cannot support.

The Benelux countries and the European Commission are important donors to UNHCR's programmes. Together they provided 18.5% of all voluntary contributions to UNHCR in

2004. UNHCR's operations are increasingly scrutinized by these important partners. Sustaining their confidence and support requires high-quality UNHCR performance worldwide. The Office in Brussels is UNHCR's the central interlocutor for the European Commission and the governments of Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands.

2. Operational goals

The work of UNHCR's Regional Representation in Brussels is situated squarely within the Regional Bureau for Europe's strategic framework for 2005 – 2010. It relates in particular to Themes One ("Strengthening asylum") and Three ("Securing Support for UNHCR Worldwide"). These themes are tied to UNHCR's global strategic objective #1 for the period 2006-2007, which is to advocate for, and support governments in, the creation and maintenance of an international protection regime, and the provision of protection and assistance, pursuant to the Agenda for Protection. The Representation's work also relates to global strategic objectives #3 and #7, insofar as the office works to promote resettlement in the Benelux countries and in the European Union more widely, and to mobilize financial and political support for durable solutions for refugees in other regions, including through their integration into development programmes.

The broad goals of the Representation's work in 2006 will be:

- a) To ensure a high standard of refugee protection in the Benelux countries;
- b) To ensure respect for international refugee protection norms in the context of the internal and external dimensions of European refugee policy;
- c) To mobilize political and financial support for refugees and for the work of UNHCR.