

Update on UNHCR operations in Europe

A. Situational analysis, including new developments

Mixed movements along the three maritime routes towards Europe remained significant, with some 270,000 refugees and migrants arriving on its shores in 2023 – a 69 per cent increase compared to the previous year. Some 3,840 deaths were recorded along the primary sea routes, representing a 27 per cent increase over 2022. Asylum-seekers and migrants continued to report expulsions, violent pushbacks and incidents of maltreatment when trying to enter the European Union, while attempts by some States to shift responsibility and externalize core asylum and protection obligations continued.

The international armed conflict in Ukraine has seen an escalation in hostilities in recent months, further exacerbating humanitarian needs in front-line areas and giving rise to serious protection risks. According to the 2024 Humanitarian Needs Response Plan, an estimated 14.6 million people are in need of multisectoral humanitarian assistance, including some 3.7 million internally displaced people. Widespread destruction of civilian housing and infrastructure, as well as the disruption of livelihoods and vital social services have rendered millions dependent on humanitarian aid.

At the end of 2023, some 6.4 million refugees from Ukraine were recorded globally, with 5.9 million residing in Europe. The findings of UNHCR surveys indicate that while most refugees hope to return to Ukraine one day, only 14 per cent plan to do so in the short term due to safety and security concerns. Consequently, continued support for countries that host large numbers of refugees from Ukraine and for the Government of Ukraine, which is addressing pressing humanitarian needs at home, remains key to meeting the needs of refugees and facilitating their longer-term social and economic inclusion.

Elsewhere in Europe, in September and October 2023, renewed tensions triggered the arrival of over 100,000 refugees in Armenia from the Karabakh region. The joint statement that was issued in December 2023 and that reconfirms the intentions of Armenia and Azerbaijan to normalize relations represents an important step towards lasting peace in the region.

Despite progress made towards the reduction of statelessness in several European countries, Europe continues to be home to approximately 540,000 stateless persons or individuals whose nationality is undetermined.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the 2023 plan and updated plans for 2024

Attaining favourable protection environments (protect)

With continued arrivals to Europe, support to governments to ensure access to territory, the implementation of fair and efficient asylum procedures and the provision of safe and dignified reception conditions remain a priority.

In December 2023, UNHCR welcomed the political agreement that was reached on the European Union’s Pact on Migration and Asylum, paving the way for its adoption before the end of the legislative term. In line with its recommendations to the Belgian and Hungarian

presidencies of the Council of the European Union,¹ UNHCR will continue to engage with European Union member States and other counterparts, including the European Commission, to identify workable solutions in support of protection-sensitive border management, fair and efficient asylum procedures, as well as equitable responsibility-sharing among European member States.

UNHCR recognizes the complex challenges that irregular and mixed population movements have presented at Europe's external borders and will further engage with States on lawful measures to respond more effectively to arrivals in accordance with international norms and standards. Fair and fast asylum procedures that respect international standards and that engage international partners to secure the safe and dignified return of those found not to be in need of international protection are critical to addressing these challenges. Advocacy for greater cooperation with countries on the key routes along which refugees and migrants are moving will continue with a view to addressing root causes of displacement and seeking alternatives, such as expanded safe and legal pathways, to dangerous journeys.

The extension of the European Union's Temporary Protection Directive until March 2025 represents an important step for refugees from Ukraine in ensuring their continued protection and access to rights and services in host countries. As the European Union considers the protection of refugees from Ukraine beyond 2025, the Office's engagement in support of a coordinated and harmonized approach will continue in line with principles of international cooperation and responsibility-sharing. Furthermore, as discussions on returns to Ukraine gather momentum, UNHCR emphasizes that while conditions in Ukraine do not permit returns to be promoted or incentivized, should refugees take the individual decision to return, these choices must be fully informed and voluntary. Given the importance of refugees undertaking "go-and-see" visits to inform their decisions to return, advocacy for a flexible approach towards temporary travel to Ukraine, along with the safeguarding of legal status and access to rights in host countries, will remain a priority.

Realizing rights in safe environments (respond)

By the end of 2023, UNHCR and its partners had provided protection and assistance, including emergency shelter and housing, essential relief items and cash assistance, to nearly 7 million people internally displaced or affected by the international armed conflict in Ukraine. Winterization activities have helped provide warm and dignified living conditions for over half a million people since September 2023, and some \$192.4 million in cash assistance was disbursed to help meet the basic needs of more than 700,000 people since January 2023.

Inside Ukraine, UNHCR will reinforce its presence close to the front line, while also prioritizing those who are most vulnerable when conducting cash-based interventions. Emergency shelter activities and support to State-run temporary accommodation continue. Although humanitarian needs remain significant, in many parts of the country early recovery efforts are under way. In this context, the Office will provide support to government-led recovery efforts, including durable repairs to homes.

In countries neighbouring Ukraine, UNHCR continues to coordinate the Ukraine Situation Regional Refugee Response Plan, engaging more than 312 partners across 11 countries, with the aim of identifying and assisting the most vulnerable and fostering greater inclusion and social cohesion. This year, the focus will remain on supporting the transition from humanitarian assistance to the effective inclusion of refugees from Ukraine in national systems and services. Targeted cash assistance for protection programmes will continue to meet the needs of the most vulnerable. Regional stockpiles will also help ensure adequate preparedness in case of new population movements.

In Armenia, UNHCR strengthened its engagement in support of the government-led response following the arrival of the refugees in Armenia. The Armenia Refugee Response Plan was launched in October 2023 for a period of six months, bringing together 60 partners in support of the humanitarian response. As of early January 2024, the Refugee Response Plan, with financial requirements amounting to \$97 million, was 40 per cent funded. To date, some 59,000 refugees have benefited from humanitarian assistance, including winterization support. Looking ahead, UNHCR will keep working with the Government of Armenia and development

¹ See <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/659c04ae4.pdf> .

actors in the transition from the provision of humanitarian assistance to a medium to long-term response. Elsewhere in the region, the engagement of UNHCR in support of all displaced populations will continue. In Azerbaijan, the return of internally displaced people and continued government efforts to identify solutions to long-term displacement, including demining in areas of return, are encouraging.

Türkiye remains one of the largest refugee-hosting countries globally, hosting 3.4 million refugees and asylum-seekers. In this country, UNHCR will continue to provide 175,000 refugees and asylum-seekers with case processing and protection services. Social cohesion activities will involve some 45,000 refugees and host community members, while support to the authorities for the inclusion of refugees in national services and the UNHCR co-leadership of the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan will also continue. Furthermore, one year on, the impact of the earthquake continues to be felt by both refugees and their Turkish hosts. In support of the State-led response, UNHCR has provided over 3 million relief items, such as tents, containers, hygiene kits, bedding and warm clothing for refugees and residents in temporary accommodation centres.

Empowering communities and achieve gender equality (empower)

In addition to the over 5.3 million people reached through the “Stay safe” campaign in 2022 and 2023, some 5.6 million people were reached last year through a “Safe online” campaign, which raised awareness of online risks such as fraud and trafficking. Online HELP webpages, established in 40 countries in Europe, continue to provide a wide range of county-specific information to refugees and received over 9 million visits in 2023 alone. In 2024, efforts will focus on ensuring the continued relevance of information available through HELP webpages and campaigns, while more detailed information will be provided on specific topics based on user feedback. Additional content targeting young people will be produced. A regional contact centre, which was established in 2023, has also received more than 52,000 calls from 19 countries in the region.

Safeguarding against and protection from sexual exploitation and abuse remain a key priority across the Ukraine situation response. In 2023, UNHCR took the lead in establishing and coordinating national networks for protection from sexual exploitation and abuse in countries neighbouring Ukraine. In partnership with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Children’s Fund and the World Health Organization, over 5,000 humanitarian workers received training on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, while over 50,000 refugees were reached through outreach in 2022 and 2023. Furthermore, nearly 100 staff members from 60 non-governmental organizations across 13 countries, benefited from UNHCR-led trainings focused on sexual exploitation and abuse investigations. In Poland, a pilot training initiative on the prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse, undertaken by the International Criminal Police Organization, IOM and UNHCR, reached 130 national police and border guards. 2024 will see efforts to expand this joint initiative to other countries in the region, while additional training tools and materials will be made available in support of country-level plans and activities to counter sexual exploitation and abuse.

Mental health and psychosocial support needs among forcibly displaced populations continue to be significant throughout the region. In response, capacity-building efforts were strengthened through regional inter-agency webinars on mental health and psychosocial support and the training of 500 humanitarian actors and front-line providers, as well as 350 government and civil society actors at regional and national levels. In 2024, continued capacity development, technical oversight and guidance for the Armenia and Ukraine responses, as well as in the Mediterranean, will be provided to ensure access to appropriate assistance and services in the region.

Across Europe, UNHCR continues to advance community-based approaches to protection and enhance participation through refugee-led organizations. In 2023, some 78 refugee-led organizations and community-based organizations in the region received grants from UNHCR, a significant increase compared to the 48 organizations that received such support in the previous year. Efforts to further engage with refugee-led organizations will be pursued in the coming period.

UNHCR also fosters partnerships with a range of stakeholders to help advocate the inclusion of forcibly displaced and stateless children in national child protection systems. Appropriate care arrangements and access to rights continue to be sought. In the context of the voluntary return to Ukraine of refugee children without parental care, UNHCR will advocate for appropriate protection safeguards with a view to ensuring the best interests of child when assisting refugee children wishing to voluntarily return to Ukraine.

Given the ongoing international armed conflict in Ukraine, which has disrupted the education of hundreds of thousands of children for a third successive school year, the inclusion of refugee children and young people from Ukraine in the national education systems of host countries remains a priority. In 2024, advocacy and support will be further strengthened to promote the adoption of immediate and longer-term measures to include more refugees in national education systems. Support for complementary programmes, including remote learning, which allow students to maintain links with the education system in Ukraine by following parts of the Ukrainian curriculum, will also continue.

Securing solutions (solve)

Access to decent work, affordable housing and social protection remain key concerns for forcibly displaced and stateless people in Europe. Looking ahead, the trend of reducing social assistance and housing benefits for refugees from Ukraine is expected to have an impact on an increasing number of refugees, while limited support structures, data gaps, mismatches of skills and lack of local language skills continue to hinder effective job matching. In response, refugee employment platforms will be consolidated and expanded with a view to linking the private sector, forcibly displaced persons and integration actors to help enhance employment opportunities. Efforts to strengthen the availability of data and guide the development of national inclusion policies will continue.

In addition, UNHCR will help address social protection barriers through advocacy, outreach, information, enrolment assistance and legal advice, particularly for the most vulnerable groups. Partnerships with national and local governments, civil society, development actors and the private sector will be reinforced in support of socioeconomic inclusion. Particular emphasis will be placed on developing and piloting innovative and replicable initiatives, enhancing monitoring and fostering capacity and commitment for effective inclusion, service delivery and refugee participation.

With a view to expanding third-country solutions, resettlement and complementary pathways remain important areas of focus. In 2023, European Union member States pledged approximately 15,900 resettlement places as well as 13,260 humanitarian admissions. As of December 2023, 15 member States had implemented their resettlement pledges, and as a result, some 12,400 refugees were resettled in Europe. In 2024 and 2025, UNHCR welcomes commitments made by 12 member States to provide over 60,700 places, including nearly 31,000 resettlement places and some 29,700 humanitarian admissions. UNHCR continues its calls for EU member States to maintain ambitious resettlement targets for 2024 with a view to resettling 44,000 refugees. Advocacy for an increase in the number of European member States implementing resettlement programmes, the adoption of flexible processing modalities and the preservation of the protection nature of resettlement, in addition to the expansion of skills-based complementary pathways, will continue.

As the #IBelong campaign enters its final year, UNHCR will accelerate efforts to address statelessness in Europe, in close partnership with civil society, regional organizations and persons with lived experiences of statelessness. To resolve the remaining known cases of statelessness in south-eastern Europe, UNHCR will capitalize on the outcomes of the Regional Conference on Access to Civil Documentation and the Prevention of Statelessness that took place in North Macedonia in October 2023 and support participating countries with the implementation of their pledges. In countries with migratory stateless populations, UNHCR will support to the establishment of statelessness determination procedures and the improvement of existing ones. To prevent new cases of statelessness from arising, advocacy will be carried out in countries with no or incomplete safeguards against child statelessness. In addition, the Office will support improved access to birth registration and identity documentation. The roll-out of the International Recommendations on Statelessness Statistics in 2024 and beyond is expected to improve the availability of data and evidence on statelessness.

C. Financial information

In October 2023, the Executive Committee approved the 2024 budget of \$1,466.2 million for the activities of UNHCR in Europe. This represents a 13 per cent decrease from the final budget for 2023 of \$1,693.5 million. This reduction is largely due to the scaling down of the Office’s operational footprint in Türkiye following the earthquake emergency response, and the continuing transition to protection and inclusion in countries neighbouring Ukraine and, to a lesser extent, in Ukraine itself. The five largest operations, accounting for \$1,170.0 million, or 80 per cent, of Europe’s budget, are: Ukraine (\$598.9 million); Türkiye (\$329.3 million); the Republic of Moldova (\$102.8 million); Poland (\$85.0 million); and, Romania (\$54.2 million). Additionally, \$12.7 million is allocated for the Armenia emergency, where UNHCR supports the Government and other partners in the protection and assistance of 100,000 refugees in Armenia.

The two impact areas with the highest budget allocations are “respond: realizing rights in safe environments” amounting to \$607.7 million, or 41.5 per cent, of Europe’s budget, and “protect: attaining favourable protection environments” coming to \$527.2 million, or 36 per cent, of the budget. These requirements reflect the significant protection and humanitarian needs of the forcibly displaced and stateless people in Europe. The impact area “solve: securing solutions” has the third highest budget allocation, reaching \$215.2 million, or 14.7 per cent, of the budget, highlighting work by UNHCR on socioeconomic inclusion and integration. The impact area “empower: empowering communities and achieving gender equality” amounts to \$116.0 million, or 7.9 per cent, of the total budget for Europe and includes activities to strengthen community engagement and gender equality.

As of 31 January 2024, some 13 per cent of the Europe region’s 2024 financial requirements were funded, taking into consideration the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.