

**REGIONAL STRATEGIC PRESENTATION SUMMARY
TO 35th STANDING COMMITTEE MEETING (7-9 March 2006)**

Bureau for Europe

Part A: Introduction

In Europe, from January to September 2005, asylum applications decreased by 18 per cent compared to the same period in 2004 (i.e. from 220,500 to 181,000). The European Union's ten new Member States reported the largest drop in applications for this period, i.e. 33 per cent.

While asylum applications in Europe continue to fall in overall numbers, countries located on the EU's Mediterranean border have come under increasing pressure from spontaneous arrivals, particularly in Malta, Italy's southern islands and the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla. In 2005, Italy for example reportedly received over 22,000 spontaneous arrivals, with the greatest numbers recorded on the remote island of Lampedusa where UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Italian Red Cross have negotiated a monitoring presence and screening mechanism with Italy's Ministry of the Interior. It is hoped that these joint initiatives will provide valuable lessons learned that could be applied in a similar context elsewhere in Europe.

UNHCR has also been promoting burden sharing within the EU with Member States at the external border. Malta and Cyprus are particularly in need of support. In 2005, Malta expressed its strong need for further support for persons who have been recognized to be in need of international protection and requested assistance from EU Member States and UNHCR. As part of a bilateral agreement with Malta and with assistance from UNHCR, the Netherlands accepted 35 persons who had been granted protection status. A more regular burden-sharing mechanism would, however, be desirable.

Romania continues to host 296 Uzbek refugees (out of the 439 Uzbeks temporarily relocated from the Kyrgyz Republic to Timisoara, Romania in July 2005 under the Humanitarian Transfer), while a UNHCR team is processing applications for third country resettlement. Until now, 144 Uzbek refugees have departed Romania for resettlement to Sweden, the Netherlands, Switzerland, the Czech Republic, Finland, Germany and the United States. Further departures are scheduled to take place to Australia, Canada and the United States. The Government of Romania has generously agreed to prolong the permit for temporary stay of this refugee population until 28 July 2006 to allow for UNHCR's resettlement operation to be completed.

This operation has had the added value of bolstering UNHCR's ongoing efforts to promote burdensharing and resettlement in Europe. A number of countries offered to accept refugees for the first time (e.g., the Czech Republic, Germany and Switzerland). Portugal and Spain accepted altogether 20 refugees from sub-Saharan Africa who were recognized by UNHCR in Morocco. UNHCR encourages countries who accepted refugees for the first time through this mechanism to consider becoming more regular resettlement countries.

Talks on the future status of the Kosovo province of Serbia and Montenegro began with the issuance of a report by Ambassador Eide and the appointment in November 2005 of Mr. Martti Ahtisaari as the United Nations Secretary-General's Special Envoy on the status process. It is hoped that progress will continue irrespective of the sudden death in January of the President of the Kosovo Provisional Institutions of Self-Government, Mr. Ibrahim Rugova. UNHCR is submitting to the Special Envoy an inventory of relevant issues it believes need to be addressed in the context of the status talks with regard to refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and other persons of concern.

In anticipation of a referendum on the future status of Montenegro (which currently forms part of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro) in mid-2006, UNHCR has advocated for the right of some 18,000 IDPs to remain in the province until longer-term, more sustainable solutions are found.

Following the April 2005 High Level Dialogue on Human Security held in Moscow and a joint stakeholders' review in June 2005, the UN Country Team for the Russian Federation developed a new cooperation framework for recovery-oriented transitional assistance in the north Caucasus. Within this revised framework, which adheres to the concept of human security, UNHCR will maintain its lead role in protection and shelter for the region's displaced populations.

In the south Caucasus, UNHCR remains committed to working with partners in achieving appropriate durable solutions for the region's displaced populations. It is hoped that there will be crucial steps forward in 2006 in the peace process between Armenia and Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh.

In Georgia, UNHCR presented a proposal for confidence-building measures in the Gali district, in support of the wider efforts to promote solutions to displacement. This proposal has thus far been endorsed by all parties involved in the conflict resolution process between Georgia and Abkhazia, including the Group of Friends of Georgia.

Part B: Progress on UNHCR's Global Strategic Objectives and the Agenda for Protection

Advocate for, and support governments in the creation and maintenance of an international protection regime

UNHCR, with its Regional Representation in Brussels, is following up on the initiatives proposed by the European Council in the November 2004 Hague Programme. Of particular importance is the commitment made by EU Member States to strengthen practical cooperation on asylum by, inter alia, establishing more effective burden-sharing mechanisms and sharing country of origin information within Europe. UNHCR has likewise expressed its readiness to work with the EU on the two pilot projects for the United Republic of Tanzania and Belarus.

The State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, having adopted an Asylum Framework Law in March 2005, is now in the process of finalizing drafts of the required implementation laws. Throughout this process, UNHCR has actively provided technical assistance.

The EC-funded regional CARDS (Community Assistance for Reconstruction, Development and Stabilization) programme on Asylum, Migration and Visas in the western Balkans was successfully concluded at the end of 2005. By conducting eight thematic seminars for asylum officials from the western Balkans on, inter alia, reception standards and the EU acquis on asylum procedures, the UNHCR-led asylum module resulted in: i) gaps analysis and country specific progress reports; ii) a Handbook for Practitioners; and iii) an Asylum Law Reader in five languages.

A final meeting to conclude the CIS Conference process – a ten year-long multilateral effort headed by UNHCR in partnership with IOM, OSCE and the Council of Europe to address issues of forced displacement – was convened in Geneva in October 2005. While discussions on follow-up activities are ongoing, an expert-level meeting is scheduled for late February 2006 in Minsk, Belarus to agree on modalities for a framework for dialogue and cooperation, as well as action and results-oriented activities.

UNHCR remains closely involved in the Cross-Border Cooperation Process (CBCP) ("Söderköping Process"), which has evolved into an important mechanism for bilateral and multilateral networking and cooperation among its ten participating States (Belarus, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, the Republic of Moldova, Romania, Slovakia, and Ukraine) as well as between these States and the European Union. The CBCP Secretariat currently collects and shares information on asylum, migration and border management, with the specific aim of transferring experience from new EU Member States to Belarus, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine.

In September 2005, the Bureau for Europe issued a report on “Identifying Gaps in Protection Capacity,” as part of an overall effort to strengthen its operational protection capacity in Eastern Europe (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova, the Russian Federation and Ukraine). Depending on the availability of resources, UNHCR intends to work with governments and partners in the region to implement projects designed to address the identified protection gaps.

Ensure international standards of protection for girls, boys, women and men of concern to UNHCR are met

Throughout Europe in 2005, there was further practical implementation of UNHCR’s objectives related to the prevention of and responses to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). UNHCR’s standard monthly SGBV reporting form, for example, is now systematically used in 14 countries, and written country-level SGBV response and prevention strategies have been developed in 17 countries. The roll-out of UNHCR’s Age, Gender, and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) strategy has so far been completed in ten countries in Europe, and will continue in 2006 and 2007.

Multi-sectoral response and prevention teams, currently operational in central, eastern and south-eastern Europe, have likewise developed the capacity to respond to SGBV incidents. UNHCR offices in these regions are implementing empowerment and self-reliance activities in support of broader local integration initiatives. Refugees from Hungary, Slovakia, Slovenia and Poland travelled to Romania and Bulgaria to observe refugee self-help programmes and meet with refugee associations. Similar exchanges are planned for 2006.

A regional analysis of gender-related persecution in European national laws and practice identified the need for increased training and capacity building to ensure gender sensitivity in refugee status determination (RSD) procedures. The Bureau for Europe has therefore produced a ready-to-use three-module resource package on gender, RSD and resettlement for UNHCR and partner staff. The Bureau for Europe also published a survey of UNHCR’s anti-trafficking activities in European operations, which includes statistics and details on national legislation and implementation arrangements.

Pursue voluntary repatriation and sustainable reintegration, resettlement or local integration for refugees, with a special focus on those in protracted refugee situations

In Georgia, a verification exercise in 2005 revealed that some 200,000 internally displaced persons from Abkhazia and South Ossetia are in need of longer-term solutions. The Secretary-General’s Special Representative on the Human Rights of Internally Displaced Persons, Mr. Walter Kälin, having visited Georgia at the end of December 2005, reaffirmed UNHCR’s current position with respect to the right of displaced persons to receive adequate protection, whether they opt for voluntary return to their places of origin or to remain in their present locations.

In the Balkans, the total numbers of persons of concern to UNHCR (refugees and IDPs) have gradually decreased since 1999, from 1.7 million to 600,000. The international community is hoping to reinvigorate the Sarajevo Declaration of January 2005, following the 2004 launch of the “3x3 Initiative” (by UNHCR, the EC and the OSCE, and involving the Governments of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, and Serbia and Montenegro), which aims to address the outstanding problems related to the region’s displacement by the end of 2006. Fair settlement over lost (housing) occupancy/tenancy rights is a preoccupying concern for all three States in the Western Balkans.

November and December 2005 saw the commemoration of the tenth anniversary of the Dayton Peace Agreement, through which more than 1 million refugees and IDPs have been enabled to return home in Bosnia and Herzegovina alone.

There are some 247,000 displaced persons (mainly ethnic Serbs and Roma) in Serbia and Montenegro (including Kosovo province). In addition, Bosnia and Herzegovina hosts some 3,000 refugees and The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia another 2,000 refugees from Serbia and Montenegro.

As outlined in earlier updates, UNHCR maintains its current focus in the Kosovo province of Serbia and Montenegro on: i) advocating for the right of displaced persons to repatriate voluntarily by, inter alia, contributing to the establishment of conditions conducive for return; and ii) facilitating and monitoring the voluntary and safe return of IDPs and refugees to their places of origin. Due to the current situation, however, the number of minority returns has steadily declined since 2000. In April 2005, UNHCR was appointed by the Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Kosovo as Chair of the Belgrade-Pristina Direct Dialogue Working Group on Returns. Two successful meetings were convened in 2005.

Pursue management reform to enhance the quality, effectiveness, and efficiency of UNHCR's operations

As reported in previous updates, UNHCR continues to group its presence in western and central Europe around regional representations. In January 2006, two new regional representations were established in Berlin and Rome. With the pre-existing regional representations in Brussels, Kyiv and Stockholm, and the Regional Representation in Budapest that opened in 2005, the initial structure for regionalization is currently in place. Further changes to the Bureau's headquarters structure were implemented at the end of 2005 to better support UNHCR's regionalized presence. Over the course of 2006 and 2007, the focus will be on enhancing the capacity of each regional representation to coordinate the creation of regional protection strategies and programmes.

The roll-out of UNHCR's new Management Systems Renewal Project (MSRP) to offices in Europe is entering its second year. UNHCR's offices in Europe, being the first to acquire and use MSRP, have contributed to improvements in the design of the software and the development of appropriate training for UNHCR staff.