**Executive Committee of the
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Update on UNHCR's operations in Europe

A. Situational analysis including new developments

Europe continued to face challenges in key areas of UNHCR's work in the region. Millions of displaced people remained in need of solutions, including in Turkey, which hosts the largest number of persons of concern to UNHCR (approximately 4 million, of whom 3.6 million were Syrian refugees) and in Ukraine, with 1.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs). Adequate long-term solutions are equally needed in response to the Mediterranean situation. The transition to a new European Union (EU) institutional cycle in 2019 presents an opportunity to reform EU asylum rules, frameworks and responses.

In 32 European countries,[1] the overall number of asylum applications is broadly comparable to 2018, with some 349,000 in the first seven months of 2019. Some countries experienced an increase in the number of asylum applications, notably Belgium, Cyprus, the Netherlands, Spain and Sweden. In Spain, nationals of certain Latin-American countries, including Colombians, Salvadorans and Venezuelans, have already lodged as many (or more) applications than in the whole of 2018. Consequently, some countries experienced pressure on their national reception and asylum systems.

In the first seven months of the year, the overall number of refugees and migrants arriving in the European Union by the central, western and eastern Mediterranean routes decreased by 37 per cent, from 73,900 in 2018 to 46,500 in 2019. As of August 2019, an estimated 928 people died at sea. Along land routes, some 62 deaths had been reported, with 32 of these near the Greece-Turkey land border. In Greece, arrivals to the islands increased by 10 per cent in 2019, while those to the Evros region in north-eastern Greece dropped by 43 per cent. In July and August, over 9,300 refugees and migrants arrived in the Greek islands. This represented the highest number of arrivals by sea in one month since the EU–Turkey statement in March 2016. The situation on the islands has deteriorated, with the refugee and migrant population reaching over 25,000. Transfers to the mainland remained limited as a result of a lack of accommodation. In the western Balkans, the situation continued to be marked by mixed movements towards western Europe. Bosnia and Herzegovina was particularly affected by this situation with people going through the region congregating close to the border with Croatia, exposing them to alleged push-backs and straining local reception capacities.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Ensuring an effective operational response

Through its enterprise risk management framework, UNHCR continued to enhance its capacity to mitigate risks and improve its operational response. The Office also commissioned an evaluation of the effectiveness and relevance of advocacy approaches with the European Union, and in European Union and European Free Trade Association

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[1] This included 28 European Union countries plus four European Free Trade Association countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland).

countries. Covering the timeframe of 2015 to 2017, the final report was published in May 2019.[2]

In the context of UNHCR's transformation, a process of decentralization and regionalization was initiated. UNHCR's operational structure in Europe is phasing out smaller regional offices and reinforcing one regional bureau with national representations. As part of this process, the internal control mechanisms of representations will be strengthened, including by providing resources and support to implement the Global Compact on Refugees.

In Greece, UNHCR's continued progress with the urban accommodation scheme and cash programme provided direct and much-needed support to asylum-seekers. At the same time, the Office cooperated with the Greek authorities towards a transition of its direct assistance to asylum-seekers and refugees to supporting government capacity to do this. UNHCR also worked closely with local authorities and operational partners to support the integration of recognized refugees. In June 2019, the Office concluded a memorandum of understanding with the Ministry of the Russian Federation for Civil Defence, Emergencies and Elimination of Consequences of Natural Disasters (EMERCOM) to build on the historical cooperation between the two bodies.

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

Efforts to reform the Common European Asylum System (CEAS), including by responding to lessons learned from the record number of arrivals in 2015 to 2016 continued, and challenges remained. In particular, reform is needed on asylum procedures and intra-EU solidarity measures to support member States at the periphery of the European Union, which are the main entry points for arrivals.

UNHCR has made specific proposals on fair and efficient asylum measures, including accelerated and simplified procedures to process manifestly well-founded and unfounded claims. To ensure sustainable and effective responsibility sharing among European Union member States, UNHCR continued to advocate integration support for those granted international protection towards mitigating onward movement. For those found not to be in need of international protection, UNHCR advocated strengthened and more efficient return mechanisms.

UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) further developed their joint proposals for a predictable disembarkation and processing mechanism following rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea. With operational support from the two organizations, the proposals align with UNHCR's non-return position on Libya, and build upon good practices from past ad hoc national arrangements. Due to diverging perspectives among European Union member States, establishing predictable, practical and reliable arrangements remained a challenge. Meanwhile, persistent reliance on lengthy boat-by-boat arrangements jeopardizes the safety of rescued people and crews, and undermines the rescue regime under maritime law. The absence of a predictable disembarkation mechanism also hinders the redeployment of robust search-and-rescue capabilities in the Mediterranean, which is essential to reduce the death toll among refugees and migrants.

Continued focus was put on advocacy and technical expertise to strengthen the implementation of current European Union law and policies to make procedures fairer and more efficient.

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

States were supported across the region in further developing their asylum systems; capacity-building initiatives were aimed at improving the efficiency of identifying

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[2] Available at https://www.unhcr.org/research/evalreports/5d09f6fd7/evaluation-effectiveness-relevance-advocacy-approaches-eu-euefta-countries.html

individuals in need of international protection, as well as those with specific needs. These efforts will be amplified by the establishment of the global Asylum Capacity Support Group, as foreseen in the Global Compact on Refugees.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, while IOM is providing accommodation and basic services for this mixed population, UNHCR focused on: providing information on asylum procedures and available services, legal aid, psychosocial support, a safe shelter for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), and the establishment of identification and referral mechanisms for persons with specific needs. In addition, the Office continued to implement regional and national asylum capacity-building activities in the framework of phase two of the European Union "Instrument for pre-accession assistance". The second phase commenced on 1 July.

In March 2019, a high-level event organized by UNHCR in Geneva took stock of achievements resulting from the "quality initiative" implemented in eastern Europe over five years. Senior officials from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine expressed interest in continuing the initiative and strengthening their role in the design and implementation of activities at the national and regional levels. UNHCR's objectives included addressing consideration of national security in asylum procedures, and ensuring legislative amendments to align national legal frameworks with obligations under international law.

In June 2019, UNHCR signed a memorandum of understanding with the Interparliamentary Assembly of Member Nations of the Commonwealth of Independent States (IPA CIS) in Saint Petersburg. The organizations committed to working together in accordance with their respective mandates, particularly in the context of legislative reform. It is envisioned that a joint work plan will specify issues for consideration in the context of regional cooperation involving the CIS member States.

In Turkey, UNHCR worked to support the Directorate General of Migration Management, which assumed full responsibility for registration and refugee status determination in 2018. UNHCR's support included capacity-building activities aimed at reducing registration backlogs, ensuring timely registration, and reinforcing documentation as a key requisite for adherence to the non-refoulement principle, as well as strengthening decision-making processes.

In the European Union, UNHCR provided technical expertise to implement accelerated and simplified procedures, in accordance with recommendations in UNHCR's 'Fair and fast' paper issued in 2018. The Office also cooperated with State authorities on identifying gaps and devising quality assurance methodologies. These efforts aim to ensure monitoring of asylum systems and processes, as well as timely remedial action.

Promoting acceptable reception conditions

In order to promote minimum standards, UNHCR continued to monitor first and second-line reception conditions. The Office worked closely with the authorities and other stakeholders to provide technical expertise, build capacity and strengthen reception systems, including through direct operational interventions where required.

Notable efforts included the establishment of mechanisms for the identification and referral of people with specific needs, and the prevention and response to SGBV and child protection issues. Nonetheless, challenges remained throughout Europe, including: (i) inadequate reception conditions; (ii) lack of accommodation space and staff capacity; (iii) unavailability of basic services; (iv) insufficient identification and response mechanisms for persons with specific needs; and (v) the use of detention or closed facilities, including for unaccompanied and separated children and families with children. In Italy, new rules on the procurement for reception facilities, as well as residence registration, have raised concern regarding access to services.

In Greece, existing structures on the islands, in particular on Samos and Lesvos, continue to need significant improvement to address severe overcrowding and insufficient provision of services. While the State-run reception facilities established as emergency arrangements in 2015 to 2016 have markedly improved, some continue to face challenges, especially for long-term living. The main issues relate to their remote and

isolated location, the type of shelter used, lack of security, and limitations in access to social services, especially for children and persons with specific needs.

In Cyprus, the increase in arrivals since 2018 highlighted the need for a comprehensive strategy to address ongoing and emerging challenges, including efforts to strengthen reception capacity.

With funds from the European Commission, UNHCR concluded a project this year to strengthen reception conditions for unaccompanied and separated children in seven countries.[3] The project emphasized guardianship, mainstreaming best interests in asylum processes and referral to national child protection systems.

With regard to addressing SGBV, UNHCR supported the European Asylum Support Office's consultative forum with civil society on gender-related persecution, as well as the strengthening of national standard operating procedures in Italy, Poland and Romania. In Italy, collaboration continued with local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to extend national services to persons of concern.

Strengthening participatory and community-based approaches

UNHCR offices across Europe continued to make concerted efforts to strengthen participatory and community-based approaches. A project to reinforce communication with communities, specifically with persons of concern, is underway in four pilot locations (France, Hungary, Spain and Sweden). In the first phase of the project, refugee-led organizations were mapped and consultations with stakeholders and persons of concern were conducted. A website was launched as an information tool for asylum-seekers and refugees in Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Turkey and Ukraine.[4] Participatory assessments took place regularly in all countries, while further efforts were made in 2019 to establish effective feedback mechanisms on UNHCR programming and interventions.

A toolkit for teachers was developed in 2018 to raise awareness about asylum-seekers and refugees in the classroom, and to provide guidance on psycho-social support for children displaying behavioural signs of stress or trauma. This year, the toolkit was expanded with translation complete or in progress in thirteen languages, and a pilot campaign was planned in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. UNHCR also encouraged the involvement of youth in strengthening community-based approaches. The second European youth initiative fund was launched in 2019, with eleven small grants awarded to youth-led projects across the region. UNHCR further supported the participation of refugee youth in European Youth Parliament events in Armenia, Germany and Spain.

Securing solutions for refugees and internally displaced persons

Finding effective solutions for refugees in Europe rests upon ensuring their self-reliance and social inclusion. It is essential that host communities are adequately supported to receive refugees and that traditional and non-traditional actors are engaged in the integration of refugees. In 2019, UNHCR engaged stakeholders to strengthen links between refugees and asylum-seekers and the multitude of actors working towards enhancing their economic, social, cultural, and legal integration. The Office continued to work closely with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) on an innovative action plan to expand employment opportunities for refugees.

In the context of UNHCR's three-year strategy on resettlement and complementary pathways (2019 to 2021), the European Union has undertaken critical efforts to address the shortage of resettlement opportunities, such as: (i) the commitment of 20 European Union member States to resettle over 50,000 refugees by the end of 2019, (ii) the proposal

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[3]   Countries included Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

[4]   See help.unhcr.org.

for a Union Resettlement Framework, and (iii) the interest in community-based sponsorship. In June 2019, UNHCR launched its community-based sponsorship initiative, which is gaining momentum, notably in Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, where pilot schemes are being implemented.

In the Western Balkans, the regional housing programme remained the main vehicle for providing accommodation solutions to vulnerable persons affected by conflicts of the 1990s. National authorities of the countries covered by the housing programme (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Montenegro and Serbia) are leading the process with continued strategic intervention from UNHCR and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

In Ukraine, within the framework of the five-year strategy for internally displaced persons, UNHCR progressed its work in removing obstacles to their freedom of movement. Notable developments in 2019 include the Ukrainian authorities issuing electronic passes to IDPs crossing the 'contact line' and the judicial decision that there should be no restrictions on goods being transported through the 'contact line'.

Preventing and resolving situations of statelessness

In collaboration with civil society and regional institutions, UNHCR continued to actively address statelessness in Europe. In February 2019, UNHCR and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) issued an advocacy brief on ending childhood statelessness in Europe, urging States and regional organizations to ensure that no child remains stateless in Europe, and proposing effective solutions.

In January 2019, UNHCR and the Ministry of Interior of Greece signed a memorandum of cooperation on Greek nationality acquisition and the prevention of statelessness. The memorandum foresees improved data on nationality acquisition and the implementation of capacity-building activities on statelessness for civil servants. The Republic of Moldova adopted instructions in May that will simplify the procedure to recognize and register births for a group at particular risk of statelessness, contributing towards its prevention.

In April 2019, UNHCR, together with the Government of Spain, organized an international conference on addressing statelessness in Europe, held in Madrid with senior representatives from over 30 countries, international and regional organizations, academia and civil society. Participants made recommendations concerning the identification and protection of stateless persons, addressing childhood statelessness, and joint efforts to end statelessness.[5] The event was part of a series of regional preparatory meetings (following the Minsk conference in December 2018) leading up to the high-level segment on statelessness that will take place at the seventieth annual session of UNHCR's Executive Committee in October.

Strengthening external relations and advocacy, and mobilizing support

Although the number of arrivals to Europe is back to levels seen prior to 2015, refugee and migration-related issues continue to dominate policy and political discourse across the region. In the context of the European Parliament elections that took place in May 2019, UNHCR issued seven key calls for the new leadership, asking for better protection of refugees in the European Union and globally.

Media interest in refugees and migration remained high, often contributing to further polarization of public debates. UNHCR engaged with States, the public, media and relevant stakeholders to generate empathy, mobilize support and influence change in policies. To counter some of the toxic political rhetoric towards refugees, the voice of UNHCR, and its amplification by influential actors, remains essential.

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[5] Available at https://www.unhcr.org/ibelong/wp-content/uploads/Europe-International-Conference-on-Addressing-Statelessness-April-2019-1.pdf

At the same time, many expressions of support and solidarity with refugees were observed across Europe, including from municipalities, communities, faith-based organizations, universities and the private sector. Universities in Austria, Cyprus and France offered scholarships to refugees; grassroots organizations welcomed refugees into local communities in Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands and other countries; and, the private sector facilitated economic integration through access to employment for refugees.

Across Europe, community sponsorship programmes proved to be enriching and rewarding as they offer a powerful way to strengthen communities, increase public understanding of refugee issues, and help shape the narrative through personal connections. In 2019, Ireland, Spain and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland launched community sponsorship programmes, enabling local communities to welcome refugees and provide an opportunity for them to make positive contributions.

UNHCR continued to be an active member of the Regional United Nations Sustainable Development Group (R-UNSDG) and Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) in Europe and Central Asia. Together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNHCR co-chaired the "Issue-based coalition on large movements of people, displacement and resilience" – a platform of the R-UNSDG and RCM that promotes joint advocacy messages related to refugees and migrants. Following the reform of the United Nations development system and adoption of the revised United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF), the interagency platform in Europe (and Central Asia) is expected to provide guidance to Resident Coordinators and United Nations country teams on including persons of concern in national development plans and the cooperation framework.

Through the coalition, UNHCR organized the "Leaving no one behind" event on the margins of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development in March 2019 in Geneva. With a focus on addressing statelessness and enhancing the resilience of vulnerable groups through the sustainable development goals, the event aimed to sensitize key stakeholders to the issue of statelessness in the context of the 2030 Agenda. It also aimed at finding new ways of achieving progress through collaboration and guidance from European and Central Asian United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) member States.

Within the Geneva International Discussions, UNHCR continued to co-moderate a working group on humanitarian issues of the conflict-affected population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

C. Financial information

The budget for UNHCR's activities in Europe, as approved by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme during its sixty-eighth session in October 2018, amounted to $833.3 million for 2019. By mid-July 2019, this budget had decreased slightly to $830.8 million due to a redistribution of activities.

Thirty-four per cent of the budget for Europe was allocated to the central Mediterranean route situation, while 42 per cent was allocated for Syrian refugees and 2 per cent for Iraqi refugees. The Ukraine situation represents 3 per cent of the overall budget.

At the sub-regional level, 54 per cent of the overall budget was allocated to operations in eastern Europe, 5 per cent to south-eastern Europe, 40 per cent to central, northern, southern and western Europe, and 1.4 per cent to Europe overall.

As of 10 September 2019, the needs for Europe of $830.8 million were 56 per cent funded after considering the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions. This leaves an indicative funding gap of $365 million.

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