



## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Bulgaria is currently hosting around 8,800 asylum-seekers and refugees, over 5,000 of them Syrians.**
- **The arrival of winter exacerbated inadequate and crowded reception conditions.**
- **UNHCR is distributing one hot meal a day to 1,400 people in Harmanli closed reception centre.**
- **UNHCR is working with the authorities to find a solution to adequate and sustainable food distribution and basic services in all centres.**
- **Weekly coordination meetings with all partners have been established, led by the State Refugee Agency (SAR) and UNHCR.**
- **UNHCR is concerned about a recent increase in xenophobic violence, reports that the authorities are planning to increase the use of closed facilities for asylum seekers, and that Syrians are being pushed back at the border in recent weeks.**

## CURRENT SITUATION IN BULGARIA

Bulgaria is currently hosting around 8,800 asylum-seekers and refugees - up from an annual average of 1,000 over the past decade - this includes over 5,000 Syrians. The majority have applied for asylum in the last six months. Half of them live in seven camps/reception centres. The other half is living in privately rented accommodation and host families.

The increase in arrivals has caused delays in registration and access to asylum procedures. Adequate information is not available to all new arrivals, including information on how to lodge an asylum claim. In addition, asylum-seekers do not benefit from free legal services. Asylum-seekers do not have the right to work during the first year and receive a monthly allowance of BGN 65 (EUR 33) which is insufficient to purchase food, clothes, hygienic supplies, medication and to meet other needs.

The reception conditions at the centres are inadequate and fall short of EU standards. Access to medical care including prompt attention, transfer to proper specialized medical care, and funds to buy medicine are not sufficient. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) has set up a health centre in Harmanli –a former military base around 50 kilometres from the Turkey border. This closed facility lacks proper beds, blankets, cooking tools, fuel, stoves, hygienic items and equipment. Asylum-seekers in other centres are not regularly fed, getting inadequate food rations from time-to-time.

This week it was reported that the government has completed the first phase of the 30 km fence it is building along its 274 kilometers long border with Turkey. The deployment of some 1,400 police officers along the border has already reduced the number of those trying to enter Bulgaria this way. There have been concerning reports of Syrians and Afghans pushed back at the border in recent weeks. UNHCR is also concerned by reports that the authorities are planning to increase the use of closed facilities for asylum-seekers.

**Increased violence and xenophobic attacks:** UNHCR is concerned over recent increases in xenophobic violence such as a reported attack on three asylum seekers, including two Syrian men, in Sofia this past week. These shameful attacks follow the stabbing of a 17-year-old Syrian youth last month.

The European Commission is providing €5.6 million in emergency funding from the European Refugee Fund, as well as €2.4 million from the Border Fund. This comes in addition to bilateral assistance provided by the Czech Republic, the Netherlands, Slovakia, in-kind assistance provided by Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, Latvia and Austria, and assistance from the United States to the Bulgarian Red Cross.



## UNHCR'S RESPONSE

UNHCR deployed an emergency technical team to Bulgaria, from the 26<sup>th</sup> to the 29<sup>th</sup> of November, which identified the following as the most urgent and critical issues to be addressed: improving reception conditions, provision of food, access to health care, delays in registration, and absence of any management and administrative structures in the centres.

UNHCR is distributing one hot meal a day to the 1,400 mostly unregistered asylum-seekers in the Harmanli centre who have no proper cooking facilities and cannot leave the camp to buy food. Asylum-seekers in

**"We cannot forget that these people have suffered enormously and it's totally unacceptable that they go on suffering once they reach the European Union[...] It is a European responsibility to receive these people and to give them the kind of hospitality and solidarity they dramatically need".**

**António Guterres,  
UN High Commissioner  
for Refugees**

other open reception centres are not regularly fed, relying on private donations, the Bulgarian Red Cross and the insufficient monthly social assistance. UNHCR is working with the authorities to find a solution to ensure adequate and sustainable food distribution and other basic services in all centres in line with the material reception conditions set out by the EU Reception Conditions Directive. UNHCR is also planning to establish child friendly spaces in each center. In addition, UNHCR is working with partners to increase a presence in all centers and provide information on asylum procedures and rights, social counselling, and legal aid.

This week the Bulgarian authorities relocated most people that were living in summer-weight tents to unfinished buildings within the Harmanli facility, where water and sanitation facilities urgently need to be improved to meet adequate standards of living. A group of especially vulnerable people including those in need of medical attention have been transferred to open reception facilities providing them with enhanced living conditions. In a positive sign, SAR will be recruiting additional staff and will mobilize registration teams to Harmanli center.

To improve cooperation and coordination, weekly meetings with stakeholders have been established, co-chaired by SAR and UNHCR.