

GREECE

08-12-11 PM

High Commissioner, Mr. Chairperson(s), Excellencies

On behalf of the Government of the Hellenic Republic and the Minister of Citizen Protection, I have the honour here today to re-confirm my country's commitment to the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and our unwavering support for refugee protection and UNHCR's work.

As you know, Greece faces a particularly strong migratory pressure due to its geographic position at the external border of the European Union, its extensive land and sea borders and its proximity with main countries of origin and transit of irregular migrants and asylum seekers. In view of this situation, but also because of our commitment to our international obligations, the Hellenic Republic considers the effective management of migration and international cooperation for the protection of refugees as matters of highest priority.

The Greek authorities make all efforts to fully respect international human rights and refugee law. Since October 2009, new measures have been taken to improve the condition of irregular migrants and asylum seekers. A National Action Plan on the reform of the asylum system and migration management is currently being implemented. This foresees a series of actions, including a new asylum system altogether, as well as screening procedures for irregular migrants and the identification of asylum seekers and vulnerable persons.

More specifically:

In November 2010, legislation was enacted which stipulates the creation of a flexible administrative mechanism, decentralized throughout the country, which will assist in the rapid review of all asylum requests. This is a first step towards improving the treatment of asylum seekers in our country.

A transitional asylum procedure has been set out, which among others, provides for a "fast-track" and a "normal" procedure and establishes fully independent Appeals Committees, with the participation of one representative of UNHCR and the National Human Rights Commission of Greece. The most pressing task of said Committees will be to clear the backlog of some 46,000 asylum requests pending for years at the second instance. These pending requests have already been decreased to 38,000, due to an

effective administrative procedure of dividing the pending cases to active and non active. As a result of the work of the Appeals Committees, our recognition rate, which was for years notorious for hovering around zero per cent, has now increased to 12.5 per cent.

In addition, a newly adopted Law provides for the establishment of an Asylum Service and of an Initial Reception Service for Migrants. The new services will operate within the Ministry of Citizen Protection, independent from the Hellenic Police and will be responsible for all policy and administrative issues related to refugee protection and the protection of vulnerable individuals. At this very difficult moment for our country, our success in overhauling our system of refugee protection depends to a large extent on the willingness of our partners, such as the European Commission and EU Member States, to help these new services acquire qualified staff, by training and equipping them with the means to carry out their work. At this crucial time in the history of refugee protection in our country, we request the continued encouragement and support of all concerned.

High Commissioner, Mr. Chair / Chairperson(s),

UNHCR has been instrumental in this reform of our asylum system and remains a vital source of support for our new services. Our European Union partners, through the European Commission and the European Asylum Support Office, but also bilaterally, provide much needed assistance. These are all positive examples of the impact that solidarity can have on improving refugee protection. We strongly believe that international and regional cooperation, solidarity and burden sharing is the only way to ensure that refugees are afforded the protection due to them. The pledges we are announcing today reflect our commitment to refugee protection.