

Central Europe and the Baltic States

Bulgaria
Cyprus
Czech Republic
Estonia
Hungary
Latvia
Lithuania
Poland
Romania
Slovakia
Slovenia
Turkey

Recent Developments

In the first six months of 2001, governments in Central Europe and the Baltic States registered over 29,000 applications for asylum. This is a 45 per cent increase compared to the same period in 2000. The greatest numbers of applications were lodged in the Czech Republic and in Hungary. The largest groups of asylum-seekers throughout the region originated from Afghanistan, Iraq, India, the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran (in that order). Some countries, however, received the most asylum applications from citizens of Bangladesh, the Ukraine, Moldova or Romania. During the same period, the number of decisions on refugee status failed fairly spectacularly to keep pace with the number of applications. This would seem to indicate persistent weaknesses in the asylum systems of the countries concerned, arguably mitigated by the continuing tendency of asylum-seekers to pursue irregular movements onwards to Western European countries.

These are issues that figure prominently on the agenda of negotiations between the European Union (EU) and candidate States in Central Europe. The impending prospect of EU enlargement continues to heighten concerns about control of the Union's external borders. With the continuing growth in human smuggling and trafficking, the trend towards criminalisation of asylum-seekers seems to be on the increase in Central Europe, as well as in Western Europe. This problem may be exacerbated following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 in the United States of America. While fully supporting resolute multilateral efforts directed at effectively combating terrorism, UNHCR must strive to avoid any unwarranted linkages between refugees and terrorists, and to counter xenophobic reactions.

The overall shortage of funds in 2001 led to several setbacks in the process of building the capacity of organised civil society to assist asylum-seekers and refugees, and to create an environment conducive to their local integration.

Strategic Objectives

In Central Europe and the Baltic States, UNHCR will continue to pursue a strategy based on three main themes, namely: strengthening asylum systems; reducing and preventing statelessness; and increasing support for refugees and UNHCR.

Asylum systems will be developed through national initiatives, formal regional co-ordination and, in time, informal cross-fertilisation.

Most of the funding that will be received for the region in 2002 will be used to strengthen legal assistance and integration programmes, as well as to promote the financial independence and sustainability of NGO partners.

Advocacy and public information will be treated as an integral part of this strategy.

UNHCR will take direct and indirect action to reduce the incidence and risk of statelessness, while ensuring that stateless persons enjoy, at the very least, a status corresponding to the standards of the 1954 Convention on Statelessness.

Although support for refugees in the countries of Central Europe is of foremost priority, UNHCR will create the relationships and mechanisms required to expand the role these countries play in terms of world-wide political and donor support for the refugee cause.

Operations

UNHCR's operations in Turkey are described in a separate chapter. The following covers all other countries in the region.

Access to Asylum Systems and Procedures

In order to secure continuing access to the territories and protection systems of States in the region, UNHCR will monitor the implementation of measures to combat illegal migration and ensure that they contain adequate safeguards against *refoulement* and other harsh treatment. Particular attention will be paid to border and airport procedures and referral mechanisms. The conclusions of the Regional Conference held in Budapest in June 2001 (within the framework of UNHCR's Global Consultations on International Protection) will serve as a benchmark for assessing the performance of States in the following areas: return of unsuccessful asylum applicants; application of the "safe third country" concept (whereby asylum is refused on technical grounds, i.e. the geographical route taken by the applicant); agreements on the transfer of responsibility for refugees who move lawfully from one country to another; and agreements on their readmission to the first of those two countries.

Strengthening Asylum Systems

The adoption by EU States of a set of binding minimum standards in several areas of substantive and procedural asylum law will have a direct impact on the asylum systems of candidate countries. UNHCR will strive to ensure that the necessary convergence of norms and practices is based on best State practice, and not on the lowest common denominator. At the same time, some States in the region will require sustained help in

raising their asylum systems to EU standards. According to the needs of each country, State capacity will be enhanced at the level of interviewers, interpreters, decision-makers, in the first and/or second instance, and the judiciary. The gradual incorporation of refugee law into university curricula will serve to strengthen vital academic and professional sources of support.

A small regional support unit, based in Budapest, will co-ordinate a number of regional projects with a view to disseminating positive national experiences, fostering consistency of approach and maximising human and financial resources. In 2002, priority areas for regional co-ordination include the development of legal clinics; expanding the network of asylum judges in the region; rationalising the production and use of country of origin information; and enhancing the skills of NGOs and refugee workers who assist them, tasked with counselling and assisting asylum-seekers and refugees.

No asylum system can be considered complete unless it provides real opportunities for refugee integration. NGO skills development and support for refugee associations must be supplemented by the necessary welfare resources and longer-term integration programmes, which in some countries are all but non-existent. UNHCR will continue to mobilise the necessary resources, and support research and pilot projects in this area. As integration



policies and programmes are developed, UNHCR will strive to maintain its special focus on refugee women and children.

Public Awareness, Advocacy and Partnership

Popular support for protection and integration policies is critical to their success and sustainability. In all countries in the region, public awareness campaigns and specific events (such as Refugee Days or Weeks) will be organised to help the public at large understand the plight of refugees and recognise the contribution refugees have

Resource Mobilisation

Building upon initiatives to mark the 50th anniversary of the 1951 Convention, and some welcome international developments, UNHCR offices will lobby governments, regional organisations and private individuals/corporations to help fund UNHCR operations worldwide. Public information and awareness campaigns, often starting with schoolchildren and their teachers, will lead to wider and better-informed support for UNHCR and the refugee cause.



Bulgaria: Refugee from Ethiopia learning new skills. *UNHCR*.

made, and continue to make, to society. In some countries, the focus on inter-communal tolerance and co-existence will have a preventive aspect, for example where UNHCR co-operates with the Council of Europe, the OSCE and the EU to combat discrimination against Roma and other minorities.

NGOs throughout the region will continue to be the main channel for UNHCR's assistance to asylum-seekers and refugees. NGOs are also, increasingly, performing an important advocacy role. Identifying alternative sources of funding for NGOs, and increasing their own fund-raising expertise, will continue to form part of UNHCR's overall strategy. External support to NGOs in the Baltic States will be indispensable in 2002, as UNHCR phases out its programmes and international staff presence.

BUDGET (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme
Baltic States (Estonia, Lithuania)	260,000
Bulgaria	952,258
Cyprus	690,494
Czech Republic	848,096
Hungary	1,266,172
Latvia	102,729
Poland	674,808
Romania	1,067,812
Slovakia	513,539
Slovenia	708,179
Turkey	5,697,397
Regional Projects ¹	570,000
Total	13,351,484

¹ Includes promotion of refugee law in Central Europe.