

COUNTRY OPERATION

BELARUS

AT A GLANCE



Main Objectives and Activities

Help the Belarusian authorities establish a proper legal framework ensuring respect for the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers, in accordance with international standards; improve public and official awareness to implement these international norms; meet the basic social and medical needs of the most vulnerable until a durable solution, such as the integration of recognised refugees or voluntary repatriation, is found; and promote cross-border and sub-regional co-operation between local NGOs and relevant government institutions, by developing their expertise and self-sufficiency.

Impact

- An amendment to the 1995 Belarusian Law on Refugees was adopted in June. UNHCR provided legal advice, thus enabling the Government to process asylum requests more efficiently. The total number of recognised refugees rose to 260.
- UNHCR's legal and financial assistance, and efforts to raise awareness, led to increased involvement of national NGOs and improved relations with the Government.

Persons of Concern

MAIN REFUGEE ORIGIN/ TYPE OF POPULATION	TOTAL IN COUNTRY	OF WHICH: UNHCR-ASSISTED	PER CENT FEMALE	PER CENT < 18
Afghanistan (Refugees)	200	30	34.6	-
Other Refugees	60	0	40.0	-
Asylum-seekers	16,400	500	-	-
Others of Concern*	160,000	-	-	-

* Ethnic Belarusians who have returned from former republics of the Soviet Union.

Income and Expenditure - SP Activities (USD)

WORKING BUDGET	INCOME FROM CONTRIBUTIONS*	OTHER FUNDS AVAILABLE**	TOTAL FUNDS AVAILABLE	TOTAL EXPENDITURE
83,300	20,980	192,320	213,300	83,300

* Includes contributions earmarked for the Special Programme in the CIS countries.

** Includes opening balance and adjustments.

The above figures do not include costs at Headquarters.

WORKING ENVIRONMENT

The Context

The erosion of democracy and economic stability in Belarus led to new challenges for national and international humanitarian organisations. One important development was that Belarus lost its special guest status in the Council of Europe. In addition, the scope for local NGO activities remained restricted, as their relations with governmental institutions and international organisations were constrained and their self-sufficiency in terms of expertise and funding limited. There was a willingness, however, on the part of the relevant authorities to co-operate with UNHCR, especially on broader migration-related issues.

Constraints

The country served as a major transit corridor for irregular migration movements and this was a cause of great concern to the Government. The lack of agreement with neighbouring States on a definition of the notion of a “safe third country” (through which they travelled before arriving in Belarus and could have sought asylum) or readmission procedures, presented significant constraints. Refugees were often unable to return to the country of transit and had to remain illegally in Belarus. Efforts to control illegal migration were hampered by the country’s political isolation. Finally, financial difficulties frequently held up the work of relevant government institutions on refugee and migration issues, particularly integration of recognised refugees.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND IMPACT

Protection and Solutions

UNHCR sought to ensure: access of asylum-seekers throughout the country to procedures; that decisions on asylum claims were consistent with international standards; that recognised refugees could integrate into Belarusian society; and that Belarus acceded to the 1951 Convention on Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. With a view to bringing national refugee legislation in line with international standards, UNHCR succeeded in incorporating a number of recommendations into the amendment of the 1995 Belarusian Refugee Law. Training activities were also organised to help the authorities to register asylum-seekers. However, UNHCR still had serious reservations about certain other provisions in the amendment, which provided formal grounds for blocking asylum-seekers’ access to

the refugee status determination procedure. Moreover, the Office was concerned by the fact that more than 40 per cent of all applications submitted to the migration services were denied registration based on the “safe third country” rule.

Activities and Assistance

Community Services: About 220 of the most vulnerable refugees and asylum-seekers received a monthly cash allowance. UNHCR also supported several NGOs providing counselling, and recreational and cultural activities (involving both refugees and local communities), to facilitate mutual understanding and acceptance.

Education: All asylum-seekers and refugee children had access to local schools. A total of 50 Afghan women were taught Russian and 54 Afghan children were enrolled in an additional programme covering Dari/Farsi languages. Refugee children had access to additional help from individual tutors in mathematics, Russian and other subjects.

Health/Nutrition: UNHCR covered the cost of treatment of chronic illness and medication not available from hospitals. Preventive health care activities were also organised. The Office provided technical assistance to the dental polyclinic in Minsk, to which it referred refugees with dental problems.

Legal Assistance: Some 300 persons received legal assistance for national registration procedures in two refugee counselling service offices. To improve status determination procedures, technical support (including computers and data processing software) and funding were given to the Interior Ministry and migration services in six regions. The Office supported the creation of seven computerised work stations to allow the State Committee for Border Troops to set up a system for managing irregular migration flows. Through its implementing partner, UNHCR contributed to the preparation and distribution (in universities, state institutions, courts and libraries) of publications related to refugees, migration issues and international human rights instruments. Several workshops were held for the university community.

Operational Support (to Agencies): Training courses covering not only refugee protection and assistance, but also programme management, fund-raising and accounting were organised for UNHCR’s governmental and non-governmental implementing part-

ners. Furthermore, the Office conducted a number of awareness-raising activities through television, interviews and the sale of notebooks. The operational costs of some implementing partners were also financed.

Shelter/Other Infrastructure: Dormitories at two factories were renovated with the agreement of the Labour Committee of the Minsk City Executive Committee, to house orphaned Afghan refugees.

ORGANISATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Management

UNHCR's office in Minsk operated under the supervision of the Regional Office in Moscow, which provided technical and administrative support. All activities were co-ordinated with UNHCR's offices in Russia and Ukraine; two international and six national staff were employed.

Working with Others

UNHCR maintained close contacts with IOM in order to co-ordinate the assistance provided to government agencies to help them address migration issues. UNHCR also maintained regular contacts with the OSCE Advisory and Monitoring Group in Belarus. A UNHCR-UNDP joint project focused on the dissemination of information on humanitarian law and human rights issues, with the longer-term objective of contributing to the development of a democratic and tolerant society in Belarus.

Office

Minsk

Partners

Government Agencies

Committee on Labor of the Minsk City Executive Committee
Ministry of Interior
Ministry of Justice
Mogilev Regional Executive Committee
State Committee of the Border Troops
Vitebsk Regional Executive Committee

NGOs

Belarusian Movement of Medical Workers' Association
Belarusian Red Cross
Center for Children and Adolescents and the International Green Cross
Independent Social Support
Minsk City Bar Association
Teachers' Trade Union
United Way Belarus
Young Women's Christian Association

OVERALL ASSESSMENT

Continued support for national NGOs is a cornerstone of UNHCR's activities in Belarus. Similarly, efforts to enhance government expertise on refugee-related issues should be part of a broader effort, along with international partners, to influence the Government and public in Belarus and promote internationally recognised norms and practices. Greater emphasis should be placed on public information and public awareness activities. In addition, more training and longer-term planning should be undertaken in co-operation with implementing partners.

It would be unwise for UNHCR to scale back its activities in the near future. The refugee status determination procedure only became operational nation-wide in June 1998. The national refugee law and its implementation still have many shortcomings, thus creating a very fragile asylum system. A further complication is the insufficient level of cross-border and sub-regional co-operation between the competent authorities of neighbouring countries on a joint refugee and migration policy.

Financial Report (USD)

Expenditure Breakdown	Current Year's Projects			Prior Years' Projects		
	General Programmes	Special Programmes	Total	General Programmes	Special Programmes	Total
Protection, Monitoring and Coordination	189,592	0	189,592	15,622	0	15,622
Community Services	51,301	0	51,301	12,529	39,983	52,512
Education	5,100	0	5,100	1,893	0	1,893
Health / Nutrition	8,610	0	8,610	0	0	0
Legal Assistance	117,261	53,190	170,451	69,520	21,667	91,186
Operational Support (to Agencies)	25,227	0	25,227	5,096	0	5,096
Shelter / Other Infrastructure	5,000	0	5,000	2,126	0	2,126
Instalments with Implementing Partners	71,882	29,564	101,447	(91,147)	(58,674)	(149,821)
Sub - total Operational	473,973	82,755	556,728	15,638	2,976	18,614
Administrative Support	34,562	0	34,562	0	0	0
Sub - total Disbursements/Deliveries	508,536	82,755	591,290	15,638	2,976	18,614
Unliquidated Obligations	12,030	545	12,575	0	0	0
TOTAL	520,566	83,300	603,866	15,638	2,976	18,614
Instalments with Implementing Partners						
Payments Made	222,969	77,167	300,136	2,143	2,976	5,119
Reporting Received	151,086	47,603	198,689	93,290	61,650	154,939
Balance	71,882	29,564	101,447	(91,147)	(58,674)	(149,821)
Outstanding 1 January	0	0	0	55,247	58,674	113,921
Refunded to UNHCR	0	0	0	(35,900)	0	(35,900)
Currency Adjustment	0	0	0	0	0	0
Outstanding 31 December	71,882	29,564	101,447	0	0	0
Unliquidated Obligations						
Outstanding 1 January	0	0	0	22,846	29,086	51,932
New Obligations	520,566	83,300	603,866	0	0	0
Disbursements	508,536	82,755	591,290	15,638	2,976	18,614
Cancellations	0	0	0	7,208	26,110	33,318
Outstanding 31 December	12,030	545	12,575	0	0	0

