

UNHCR TURKEY

March Operational Update



Refugees, asylum seekers and migrants rescued from the Evros River on the Turkish bank of the river. ©UNHCR

Key Figures

Refugees and asylum-seekers in Turkey including almost 3.6 million Syrian nationals to 330,000 registered refugees and asylum-seekers of other nationalities. Over 98% of Syrian refugees live across Turkey in 81 provinces

49,200 followers of UNHCR's Communication with Communities Facebook page, known as the UNHCR Turkey Information Board

2,054 refugees departed for resettlement in 2020 as of end of March, 74 per cent of whom are Syrians

5,848 people Evacuated from the Pazarkule (Edirne) area on 27 March as a preventive measure against COVID-19 and transferred to 14 days quarantine in different locations across Turkey (according to Ministry of Interior figures)

Overview and developments of the situation at the Western borders of Turkey

Following developments in Idlib, Syria, on 28 February, President Erdogan announced that Turkey would open its western borders and allow refugees and migrants to pass freely. The announcement prompted movements to Turkey's western border area with efforts to cross into Greece. A significant number of refugees, asylum-seekers and migrants gathered at the land-borders, in particular at Pazarkule, as well as in smaller numbers across villages along the Evros-Meric river.

Estimates of the **numbers** of people gathered at Pazarkule and other locations along the land borders ranged between 12,000-25,000 but began to stabilise and decreased gradually, with increasing efforts to encourage returns to cities of residences, including by offering free transportation by buses, provided by the authorities. After 9 March, the Pazarkule area was almost fully covered with tents.

The **situation** at the Western border was difficult, including due to weather conditions and was further exacerbated by the risk posed by the COVID-19 outbreak. The Turkish authorities therefore intensified their encouragement for people to return to their cities of residence and particularly from 21 March onward more people left the area. By 26 March, as a preventive measure and in order to contain any spread of the virus within the Pazarkule area, the remaining 5,848 persons in Pazarkule were evacuated and were transferred to closed facilities in nine provinces.

In the initial days, the groups at the land border area comprised, according to observations by different sources, mainly **nationals** of Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, with a smaller group from Syria, Nigeria and Cameroon. Estimates indicated that individuals were from 29 countries, one-third from Afghanistan, one-third from Syria, with the majority of those remaining from Iran, Somalia and Iraq. Women, children, and elderly people were among them. The group consisted of both registered and un-registered people who had come from different cities in Turkey.

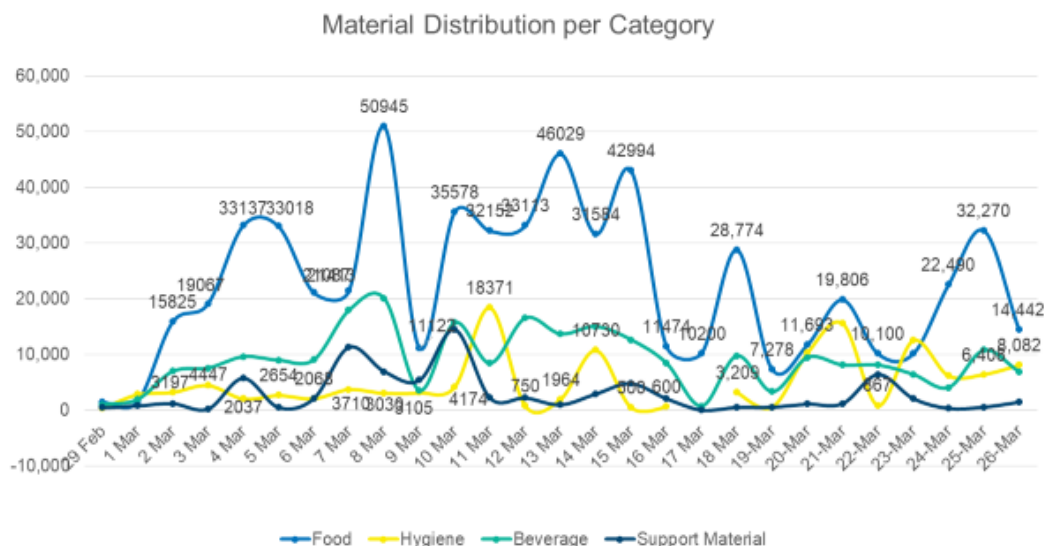
UNHCR's mission team in Pazarkule **interviewed persons** who had arrived from different parts of Turkey. The nationalities of persons interviewed were Afghan, Syrian, Somalian and Senegalese. Some interviewees were accompanied by family members including persons with medical concerns, pregnant women and children. They had been motivated by public announcements of the Turkish authorities on the opening of borders and the high number of persons crossing to Greece. Some had sold all their belongings before heading to Edirne and said they had nothing to go back to. Some mentioned that they had left their families behind, with the intention to assess the conditions first. For some cases, their money had been taken either during push-back incidents or by smugglers and even though they would have liked to return to their provinces of registration in Turkey, they were unable to do so. They indicated that should there be support, they would be willing to return to their provinces.

On 31 March, DGMM issued a press statement on precautionary steps taken for people who were transferred from Pazarkule and moved into **quarantine** at various removal centres across the country. The press release stated that upon conclusion of the quarantine period, and as per instructions from the Minister of Interior, no foreigner would be prevented from returning to provinces of registration. It also detailed the precautionary measures taken, including disinfecting the tents in the Pazarkule area, awareness on preventive measures, supporting officials and workers in the area and eventually dispersing the camp to prevent a public health risk. For those who were transferred to removal centres and placed under quarantine, medical checks were carried out, and people were being monitored by doctors from the Provincial Directorate of Health during the quarantine period.

The Deputy Governor of Edirne assigned the **coordination of humanitarian assistance** in the districts along the border to different actors. The provision of emergency assistance took place for the most part in Pazarkule, and to a more limited extent in Meric, Ipsala and Uzunkopru. The Disaster and Emergency Management Agency (AFAD) was responsible for the coordination of distributions which took place on a daily basis. The Turkish Red Crescent and the Humanitarian Relief Foundation responded to humanitarian needs in other crossing points such as Meric, Ipsala and Uzunkopru under the coordination of Edirne PDMM and Edirne Governorate. Three medical tents were set up in Pazarkule with around 40 medical staff and three ambulance teams. Furthermore, the Provincial Directorate of Family, Labour and

Social Services (PDoFLSS) of Edirne deployed a team which liaised closely with UNHCR especially with regards to referring relevant persons to childcare institutions and women shelters.

In consultations with Turkish authorities, national and local officials and agencies and NGOs, UNHCR identified a number of **protection risks** prevalent in the Pazarkule border area. The risks included



Material distribution of humanitarian assistance to people in the Pazarkule area and its surroundings by all partners. ©UNHCR

location of distribution points, limited hygiene number of WASH facilities and their locations subjecting women and children to harassment and violence, lack of proper lighting, security, the prevalence of persons with specific needs in the encampment area, lack of documentation, limited access to reliable information-sharing and communication channels, as well as lack of information on referral pathways for registered and unregistered individuals.

UNHCR response at the Western borders of Turkey

Immediately following the unfolding of events, UNHCR deployed teams to the Western border areas, particularly to Edirne as well as mobile teams along the coast. Both at the land and sea borders, UNHCR teams were in close contact with local authorities, border officials, other UN agencies on the ground and NGO partners to assess needs and coordinate humanitarian support. UNHCR regularly participated in the daily coordination meetings led by DGMM, Edirne Governorate, AFAD, and others at Pazarkule which focused on distribution of humanitarian assistance. UNHCR’s mission team provided technical support in information management of the distributions in the area, Arabic and Farsi interpreter support to PDMM and raised the concerns and suggestions of the protection actors.

In view of the dire physical conditions, UNHCR provided targeted **basic needs assistance** including food packs, water, and blankets. Having distributed a total of 43,131 humanitarian assistance items, UNHCR contributed 11,656 bottles of water and 26,950 food packs. Additionally, UNHCR provided information management support in the reporting and analysis of the distributions and shared daily reports with PDMM. PDMM shared these reports with DGMM and Edirne Governorate.

UNHCR also established a **protection-based coordinated response** and chaired regular Protection and Case Processing meetings with partners operating in the area, including the Edirne PDoFLSS. Persons with specific needs, with serious medical conditions, unaccompanied and separated children, pregnant women and pushback survivors on the ground were identified and referred to relevant NGOs and public institutions so that targeted protection interventions could be provided. Protection concerns were also raised in the daily coordination meetings chaired by DGMM. For vulnerability identification and referrals, UNHCR provided technical guidance on systematizing vulnerability identifications, risk assessment and case prioritizations, protection screening and referrals, initiated community-based protection activities, advocated with public authorities for protection sensitive decisions and actions, and supported the establishment of referral lines between NGOs and PDoFLSS, PDMM, the Provincial Directorate of Health and Bar Associations.

Furthermore, as agreed with DGMM, UNHCR provided **transportation support** to refugees to their provinces of registration from Istanbul, focusing on the more vulnerable families with women and children. Buses, free of charge, were provided by DGMM for those wishing to leave the Pazarkule border area to Istanbul. UNHCR liaised with partners' mobile teams in Istanbul Esenler Bus Station. If returnees were registered with the authorities, UNHCR and partners facilitated their return to registration provinces. Altogether, 384 persons received bus tickets and travelled to their cities of residence from UNHCR. In addition, UNHCR provided cash support for 154 persons who wanted to leave Pazarkule and return to their province of registration. The cash was distributed through UNHCR partner ASAM which used vulnerability criteria, agreed upon with UNHCR, to identify beneficiaries. With UNHCR advocacy and ASAM facilitation, private donations received were also distributed to 473 individuals as cash support based on vulnerability criteria to incentivise returns.

Key operational developments on the Coronavirus situation

Turkey's first positive case of COVID-19 was identified on 11 March. As of 17 March, Turkey had confirmed 47 active cases of COVID-19. Consequently, DGMM put in place a set of measures from 17 March onwards. These included suspending the registration of international and temporary protection applicants (with the exception of persons with special needs) and international protection status determination procedures until further notice. Updating and verification of registration records would be suspended with the exception of cases with special needs. Transfer requests to different provinces would be on hold and temporary protection beneficiaries with a verification appointment would receive SMSs postponing their appointments. Processing of voluntary return would continue in certain provinces. Furthermore, Kilis and Gaziantep governorates announced the suspension of Eid Visits through their websites until further notice.

In line with its Business Continuity Plan, and coordinated with the UN Turkey Crisis Management Team, UNHCR in Turkey initiated teleworking during the third week of March and by 26 March was operating on close to full teleworking mode with the exception of a number of critical functions across the country. Most of UNHCR's partners adopted teleworking modality from mid-March.

Promoting Access to and Provision of Protection

Support to registration and development of the national asylum system

UNHCR continued to cooperate with DGMM in strengthening international protection status determination procedures, supporting **International Protection Bureaux (Decision Centres) and the Mobile Decision Teams** established by DGMM. In March, support included conducting interviews and drafting recommendations to support case-processing at the Ankara Decision Centre. From 18 March, PDMMs only processed urgent cases in line with the Government of Turkey's measures to mitigate the risk of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To respond to the needs at the western borders, UNHCR supported DGMM with the temporary re-deployment of nine interpreters from Ankara and Istanbul decision centres, as well as from Istanbul PDMM, to Edirne at the beginning of March.

In view of the COVID-19 related measures put in place, only the registration of persons with special needs (including those with medical needs and emergency-related cases) is being processed while applications outside of these criteria initially were to be looked into at later dates based on how the situation evolves. Similarly, Protection Desks continue the referrals of urgent cases to service providers and inform respective public institutions as applicable.

In South East Turkey, with the exception of newborns and persons with specific needs, PDMMs in all provinces suspended registration processes because of COVID-19 mitigation measures. In Sanliurfa, UNHCR followed up with PDMM on the situation of refugees who had arrived from Elazig, whose transfer UNHCR had supported following the January earthquake. PDMM prioritised and registered 285 individuals who had requested to change their residential province from Elazig to Sanliurfa.

A five-day study visit to Dublin, Ireland, took place from 9-13 March, with five judges from Ankara and Erzurum Administrative and Regional Administrative Courts, three officials from the Legal Department

of DGMM and three UNHCR staff members. Participants visited institutions with a particular focus on appeal-level decision-making. The delegation was briefed by respective institutions, exchanged views through Q&A sessions and observed hearings at the High Court and the Appeal's Tribunal.

Strengthening access to justice by refugees

The Şanlıurfa Legal Clinic provided **legal assistance** to 47 individuals in March (until 17 March when COVID-19 mitigation measures were put into place), regarding international and temporary protection procedures (including registration and documentation), access to services, civil law matters (such as marriage, divorce, custody and guardianship), deportation, exit and re-entry procedures, family reunification and citizenship procedures. Similarly, 77 individuals benefitted from legal assistance provided by the Gaziantep Legal Clinic, while the Hatay Legal Clinic provided legal assistance to 102 individuals.

In cooperation with local associations and UNHCR partner Support to Life (STL), the Sanliurfa legal clinic organised four information sessions for 64 refugees focusing on labour law, rent law and Turkish citizenship. The Hatay legal clinic organised an information session for 17 refugees to discuss legal and psychological aspects of early marriage. In mid-March, legal partners and legal clinics in South East Turkey suspended their activities within COVID-19 mitigation measures. However, they continue to follow up high risk cases referred to by UNHCR.

Strengthening Protection and Access to Quality Services of Refugees with Specific Needs

The **UNHCR Counselling Line** has been operating in full teleworking mode since 23 March, answering altogether 12,966 calls in March, without interruption, and providing counselling on services, procedures, referrals and existing support mechanisms, and more specifically providing temporary and international protection status holders access to the Government's messaging on COVID-19 in different languages, as well as related information and counselling. The answer rate for queued calls was 94 per cent. While resettlement related queries remained a majority during the first three weeks of March, in the last week, the line saw a drastic increase in the rate of requests for financial assistance motivated by the impact of COVID-19. There was also a significant increase in the rate of calls by Farsi-speaking individuals. The **Refugee Call Centre** in Sanliurfa received 153 calls in March. The call operators solved most queries, which focused on financial assistance and urgent needs. Furthermore, UNHCR counselled 37 refugees through the **Gaziantep hotline**, mainly on resettlement, medical assistance and ESN assistance. Refugees were also advised to call the UNHCR Counselling Line to receive further information on their queries. In line with COVID-19 mitigation measures, **gate queries** were directed to the UNHCR Counselling Line through a notice in four languages placed at the gate. With these measures in place, the most urgent cases are still referred to relevant partners and services.

Child protection, Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) prevention and response, identification of and social support to refugees with specific needs

UNHCR identified and assessed individuals with specific needs in March who were referred to UNHCR's partners and service providers. SGBV survivors were provided with necessary counselling by UNHCR and partners on sexually transmitted diseases, medical treatments and psychological assistance, and for some vulnerable cases, cash assistance.

In order to identify protection responses and solutions, 42 **best interests assessments** (BIAs) were concluded through an interagency panel. Thirty-one children were newly identified as survivors of SGBV and were referred to partners and relevant protection mechanisms. Furthermore, under the Joint Programme on Child, Early and Forced Marriages a meeting with UN Women, UNICEF, UNFPA, IOM and UNHCR was held online to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on the activities and necessary measures which need to be taken within the programme.

As part of the UNHCR's **cash for protection** interventions, 11,491 individuals were provided with financial assistance. The payments were made to vulnerable refugees and asylum-seekers of different profiles, including transgender, intersex, adolescents discharged from child-care institutions as well as those attending various educational courses.

Communication with Communities (CwC)

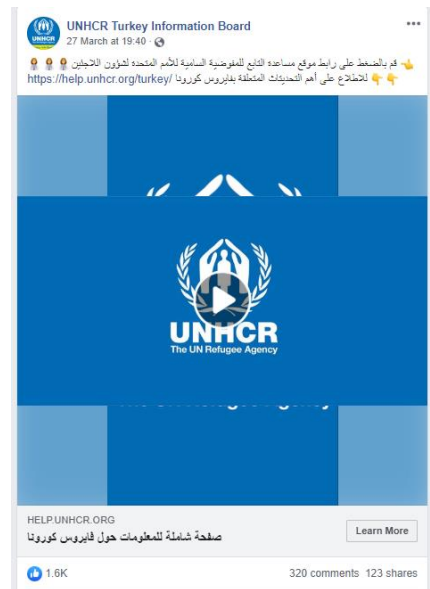


Information post in Farsi on the CwC facebook page on how to protect oneself from COVID-19

Through its main digital CwC platforms, Help and Services Advisor, UNHCR continues to share information about rights, obligations and available services with persons of concern. In March, Help reached approximately 691,000 unique visitors since its launch in August 2017. UNHCR’s followers continue to grow on the **CwC Facebook page**, known as the UNHCR Turkey Information Board, with approximately 49,200 followers/likes. In March the posts on the Facebook page and replies to refugee queries provided information and posters in Arabic and Farsi on resettlement departures and temporary postponement of interviews. COVID-19 related awareness posts and videos in coordination with the UN and the Government of Turkey were shared almost daily.

In March, UNHCR’s CwC team created a **dedicated tab on COVID-19** on the Help website, which contained important announcements, Q&A, resources and useful links in four languages (English, Turkish, Arabic and Farsi). UNHCR also produced 330,000 COVID-19-related posters, leaflets and booklets printed by UNHCR in liaison with the Turkish Ministry of Health. The materials were distributed to UNHCR field units and partners, PDMs in 81 provinces and the Ministry of Health.

In addition, and to enhance reach via social media, UNHCR created a designated **UNHCR Turkey WhatsApp Communications Tree**, a tool that would facilitate rapid and zero-cost information-sharing between UNHCR and persons of concern through its focal points and partners. The tree has three levels: Arabic and Farsi managed by UNHCR’s CwC team; level two managed by UNHCR focal points in each field unit; while the third level is managed through partner focal points with existing WhatsApp groups run by refugee committees and communities or partners who can receive the key messages. As of end of March, through the WhatsApp tree, UNHCR reached 5,591 persons of concern, which means approximately 27,955 family members.



Reference to the COVID-19 Tab on the Help website in Arabic – from the CwC facebook page.

In four locations of South East Turkey in Sirrin, Sanliurfa and Mardin, UNHCR held discussions with around 150 refugees to ask them about the Sanliurfa Call Centre and the UNHCR Counselling Line based in Ankara. The discussions, which were held 5-11 March, helped to better understand the level of awareness of those services. The exercise was cut short because of COVID-19 mitigation measures. However, initial findings showed that although only few refugees were aware of the call centre and counselling line, they were glad the service existed.

Promoting Social Cohesion and Harmonization

Engaging at the local level

To celebrate International Women's Day, Seyhan Municipality Women Solidarity Centre in Adana, Mavi Kalem and UNHCR organised an event for more than 100 participants from both host and Syrian communities, who took part in different workshops such as planting, paper marbling, Indian henna and awareness raising on gender issues. Officials from the Seyhan Municipality were also present at the event.

In the Anatolian region, International Women's Day events highlighting stories of refugee women took place in Batman, Van, Sivas and Zonguldak. The events brought together women from the host and refugee communities. In Batman, the event was organised in cooperation with the Bar Association.

Working towards Durable Solutions

Resettlement and complementary pathways

As of end of March, UNHCR provided **3,449 submissions** (2,852 Syrians and 597 refugees of other nationalities), and **2,054 refugees departed for resettlement** (1,526 Syrians and 528 refugees of other nationalities). DGMM referred 983 Syrians and 102 individuals of other nationalities to UNHCR for resettlement consideration in March and UNHCR conducted two resettlement interview missions across Turkey.

A selection mission from Finland which took place in Ankara 3-11 March, selected 292 Syrian refugees for resettlement. A number of ongoing and scheduled selection missions, however, were postponed due to mitigating measures and travel restrictions related to COVID-19. These included, missions of USCIS and BAMF officials who were recalled in mid-March. A selection mission from France which was planned to occur in March was also cancelled. Furthermore, 31 refugees who were scheduled to depart Turkey on resettlement were stranded in Istanbul and could not depart Turkey. UNHCR will assist these refugees to re-establish themselves and meet their basic living conditions. Two Iranian refugees accepted by Canada under a Private Sponsorship Programme were also unable to depart. DGMM were informed to ensure that they retain their international protection status until they are able to depart.

Increasing Multi-Stakeholder Support to the Refugee Response

Interagency coordination

In compliance with the COVID-19 mitigation measures, all interagency coordination efforts now take place through virtual platforms, including all 3RP sector meetings and the monthly Syria Task Force meeting. The comprehensive shift to virtual coordination aims to ensure that inter-sectoral support to the refugee response continues. UNHCR is working closely with UN partners in the Emergency Response Preparedness (ERP) working group chaired by WHO to ensure that needs of refugees are integrated into the UN COVID-19 prevention and response actions. To that end, UNHCR facilitates the coordination of communication to communities with a focus on refugee, migrant and refugee-hosting communities under the ERP working group.

The **Services Advisor** platform is currently being updated with information to serve refugees better during the COVID-19 pandemic. Services which are being provided remotely have been identified and marked accordingly, and agencies which provide specific services to alleviate the negative impact of COVID-19 on refugees have also been contacted to include their services in the platform.

The UN and the Strategy and Budget Directorate (SBB) agreed upon priority areas and outcome statements for the United Nations Sustainable Development Cooperation Framework (UNSDCF 2021-

2025). In the coming weeks, UNHCR and IOM will lead discussions on identifying SDG-aligned indicators for the upcoming results framework for areas relevant to migration policies and implementation and harmonization.

The cash-based interventions (CBI) technical working group finalised the cash-based initiatives mapping of 2019-2020 activities which captured 43 programs from 17 organizations under five sectors. UNHCR's information management team established an online dashboard to share the findings. This tool will provide the most needed CBI programming data such as coverage, conditionality, transfer mechanisms and transfer values.

The interagency information management team followed up on the installation of **20 information kiosks** in locations identified by the Istanbul PDMM; including PDMM Offices, Coordination Centres and the Istanbul and Sabiha Gokcen Airports. The kiosks aim to improve the knowledge of UNHCR-led CWC tools among targeted groups. Due to COVID-19 mitigation measures, the kiosks at the airports were deactivated and relocated to a less densely populated location.

Public information and communications

In March, UNHCR Turkey's Facebook page reached over 37,600 followers and the Twitter account 10,800 followers. The past month's media requests have focused on the situation at the western borders of Turkey and the COVID-19 outbreak and its effect on the refugees.

Thanks to donors for their support to UNHCR Turkey in 2020 as of 6 April 2020

European Union | USA | Japan | Switzerland | Germany | Finland | Sweden | Canada | Norway | Netherlands | Denmark | United Kingdom | Private donors

CONTACTS

Amira Abd El-Khalek, Reporting Officer, Turkey, abdelkha@unhcr.org, Tel: +90 312 409 7420

LINKS

[Regional Portal - Syria Regional Refugee Response](#) | [Regional Portal - Mediterranean](#) | [UNHCR Turkey website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Services Advisor](#) | [UNHCR Help](#)