**Executive Committee of the
High Commissioner's Programme**

Standing Committee
77th meeting

Update on UNHCR's operations in Europe

A. Situational analysis including new developments

The number refugees and asylum-seekers arriving to Europe through Mediterranean routes decreased from 141,472 individuals in 2018 to 125,472 in 2019, in line with the trend observed since 2015. Within this context, new arrival patterns were also documented. While the number of arrivals by sea to Italy and Spain reduced by more than half in 2019, sea arrivals to Greece nearly doubled and represent approximately 60 per cent of all arrivals by sea to European coastal countries in 2019. More than one third of new arrivals in Greece were children, of which 5,200 were unaccompanied minors. This reality raises critical protection concerns with conditions on the Aegean islands having also visibly worsened due to the slow pace of transfers off the islands and subsequent overcrowding.

It is estimated that 1,327 people lost their lives in the Mediterranean Sea in 2019. Although the figure is thought to have decreased by more than 30 per cent since 2018, the number of deaths in proportion to arrivals has grown. Mediterranean search-and-rescue operations saw their operating capacity decrease further in 2019, and only limited progress was made in ensuring predictable disembarkation arrangements. Cooperation between States on both sides of the Mediterranean continued with a view to reducing irregular migration, including by strengthening the Libyan Coast Guard. As a result, 45 per cent fewer people attempted to cross the Mediterranean from Libya than in the previous year, while a higher proportion of people were disembarked and detained in Libya.

Mixed movements across south-eastern Europe continued in 2019, with 53,116 individuals estimated to have arrived and/or transited through the region over the year. This represents a 27 per cent increase in arrivals compared with 2018, straining local reception capacity and resulting in increased protection risks. UNHCR continues to work with countries in the region to strengthen asylum systems and improve reception capacity, while simultaneously advocating for an environment conducive to refugee inclusion and eventual integration.

While the overall number of asylum applications received by the 32 European countries[1] in 2019 remained relatively constant with that of 2018, some countries – including Croatia, Malta and Slovakia – experienced a notable increase. Spain also received more than 107,000 applications in 2019, up 50 per cent from 2018, owing in large part to an increase in claims by Venezuelans, Colombians and Central American nationals. Elsewhere in the region, Turkey remained the largest refugee-hosting country with approximately 4 million refugees, of whom 3.6 million are Syrian. In Ukraine, 1.5 million people remain affected by conflict and/or internal displacement, but UNHCR noted positive steps toward a de-escalation of tensions in eastern Ukraine toward the end of 2019.

Investments in the socio-economic integration of refugees and migrants continued to show significant progress and potential: examples of good practice, particularly at municipal level, are evident in many parts of Europe. Greater efforts are needed, however, to ensure

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[1] This included 28 European Union countries plus four European Free Trade Association countries (Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland).

labour market inclusion, address administrative barriers, and improve access to social services.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the global strategic priorities

Ensuring an effective operational response

UNHCR's ongoing transformation process culminated at the end of 2019 with the transition to a decentralized organizational design. While the Regional Bureau for Europe remains in Geneva, the Change process has significantly increased its second line of defence capacities to support country operations, ensure cohesive approaches to resource planning and budgeting, ensure quality delivery of advocacy and programmes, coordinate external engagement, and manage emerging risks and new opportunities in a more proactive manner. At field level, several regional offices have also been restructured to ensure optimal exercise of new roles, authorities and accountabilities under a revised resource allocation framework.

In Greece, with funding from the European Commission, UNHCR and the Government of Greece initiated transition modalities for the management of the large-scale Emergency Support to Integration and Accommodation programme accommodation scheme from UNHCR to the Government. The transition plan envisages the handover of all 25,500 places for asylum-seekers in apartments to the Government by the end of 2020. The office is also cooperating with Greek authorities to transition the cash assistance programme for asylum-seekers and refugees from UNHCR to national authorities in 2021.

In Ukraine, UNHCR reduced operational interventions in keeping with its Multi-Year Multi-Partner (MYMP) strategy. This reduction in operational engagement has been achieved by capitalizing on available national capacities and expertise, while UNHCR's interventions have been re-focused in geographical areas most at need and with fewer other actors.

Reforming the Common European Asylum System and strengthening the collective European response

The new European Commission, which took Office in December 2019, has indicated plans to draft a new, comprehensive 'Pact' on migration and asylum in early 2020. The initiative of the new Commission seeks to foster support for critical reforms of existing asylum procedures and greater intra-European Union solidarity measures through the new pact.

To ensure sustainable and effective responsibility sharing among European Union member States, UNHCR continues to advocate for robust integration support for those granted international protection, to foster social inclusion and self-reliance and to mitigate irregular onward movement. For those found not to be in need of international protection, UNHCR advocates for strengthened and more efficient return mechanisms.

UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) advocated for their joint proposal for establishing a predictable disembarkation and processing mechanism following rescue operations in the Mediterranean Sea. With operational support from the two organizations, the proposals align with UNHCR's non-return position on Libya and build upon good practices from past ad hoc national arrangements. Due to diverging perspectives among European Union member States, establishing predictable, practical and reliable arrangements remained a challenge. In September 2019, some member States supported a proposal for a temporary predictable mechanism for the disembarkation and relocation of persons rescued in the Mediterranean Sea. The so-called 'Malta Declaration' seeks to overcome lengthy boat-by-boat ad hoc arrangements that jeopardize the safety of rescued people and crews and undermine the international rescue regime under maritime law. Standard operating procedures were developed and informally agreed upon by some European Union Member States to be used for disembarkation of NGO vessels in Italy and Malta. The redeployment of robust search-and-rescue capabilities in the Mediterranean remains one of the essential components in addressing the risks faced by persons, including asylum-seekers, engaging in the central Mediterranean route.

Safeguarding asylum space and building effective protection systems, including in the context of mixed movements

The global Asylum Capacity Support Group, a key provision of the Global Compact on Refugees, was formally launched during the Global Refugee Forum in December 2019. States in the region have indicated their interest in contributing to, or benefiting from, the future initiatives of the Support Group. In the meantime, UNHCR continued to support States in the region in further developing their asylum systems through a number of capacity-building initiatives to improve the identification of individuals in need of international protection, as well as those with specific needs. UNHCR cooperates closely with the European Asylum Support Office in this regard, contributing to some of its initiatives in the European Union and coordinating capacity development activities in other countries.

In south-eastern Europe, which constitutes a key transit corridor for mixed movements, a number of regional and national initiatives were launched to support officials in charge of refugee and asylum issues. These activities came within the framework of phase two of the European Union "Instrument for pre-accession assistance" programme, which commenced on 1 July 2019. Working closely with IOM, UNHCR continues to focus on the provision of information on asylum procedures and available services, legal aid, psychosocial support, safe shelter for survivors of sexual and gender-based violence, and the establishment of identification and referral mechanisms for persons with specific needs.

In eastern Europe, UNHCR was consulted by the Government of Ukraine regarding the preparation of a new asylum legislation, while capacity-building initiatives in support of the Government of Belarus were also pursued. In Turkey, UNHCR continued to support the Directorate General of Migration Management, which assumed full responsibility for registration and refugee status determination in 2018. Reducing registration backlogs, timely registration, and issuance of documentation, as well as strengthening decision-making processes remained key elements of UNHCR's support role in Turkey. In the European Union, UNHCR provided technical expertise to implement accelerated and simplified procedures, in accordance with recommendations in UNHCR's 'Fair and fast' paper issued in 2018.

Promoting acceptable reception conditions

With a view to ensuring minimum standards are met, particularly in areas impacted by high numbers of arrivals, UNHCR continued to monitor first and second-line reception conditions. The Office worked closely with the authorities and other stakeholders to provide technical expertise, build capacity and strengthen reception systems, including through direct operational interventions where required.

These efforts included the establishment of mechanisms for the identification and referral of people with specific needs, and the prevention and response to sexual and gender-based violence and child protection issues. Nonetheless, challenges remained in many countries in the region, including: (i) inadequate reception conditions; (ii) lack of accommodation space and staff capacity; (iii) unavailability of basic services; (iv) insufficient identification and response mechanisms for persons with specific needs; and (v) the use of detention or closed facilities, including for unaccompanied and separated children and families with children.

In Greece, existing structures on the islands, in particular on Samos and Lesvos, continue to require significant improvement to address severe overcrowding and inadequate service provision. The main issues relate to severe overcrowding; their remote and isolated location; the type of shelter used; lack of security; and limitations in access to social services, including health and mental health services, especially for children, unaccompanied minors and persons with specific needs.

In Cyprus, the increase in arrivals since 2018 has highlighted the need for a comprehensive strategy to address ongoing and emerging challenges, including efforts to strengthen reception capacity. Malta is facing similar difficulties, which have led the Government to reconsider its approach to reception.

With funds from the European Commission, UNHCR concluded a project in 2019 to strengthen reception conditions for unaccompanied and separated children in seven countries.[2] The project emphasized guardianship, mainstreaming best interests in asylum processes and referral to national child protection systems. In addition, UNHCR worked in partnership with IOM, the Lumos Foundation and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to map alternative care arrangements in six countries in the region with the aim of informing policy and decision making in favour of integrated, child rights-centred, family- and community-based care for unaccompanied migrant, asylum-seeking and refugee children.

Strengthening participatory and community-based approaches

Offices across Europe continued to support strengthened participatory and community-based approaches aimed at ensuring improved protection and socio-economic inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers. Pilot projects to enhance communication and community engagement continued in France, Hungary, Spain and Sweden. UNHCR supported the introduction of a range of community-based interventions including an outreach coordination mechanism (Hungary) and refugee outreach volunteer programme (Spain). Furthermore, Italy successfully implemented a programme building the capacity of refugee-led organizations which provided support to 10 organizations in 2018 and to 16 organizations in 2019, to facilitate the participation of refugees in economic, social and cultural activities

UNHCR continued to reinforce information and communication channels with persons of concern, including through the [UNHCR 'help' website](#) (Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Cyprus, Germany, Greece, Turkey and Ukraine), and child-friendly information tools. Participatory assessments took place regularly in all countries across the region, including during protection and reception monitoring exercises. Additional efforts were also made in 2019 to work with authorities to establish effective feedback mechanisms on programmes and interventions.

The second European youth initiative fund was launched in 2019, with eleven small grants awarded to youth-led projects across the region. Projects were innovative and diverse, and included the establishment of a youth coalition in Armenia, workshops on journalism and income generation initiatives in Greece, as well as the creation of an information technology hub in Ukraine. UNHCR also continued to support the participation of refugee youth in European Youth Parliament events in Armenia, Germany and Spain.

Securing solutions for refugees

In line with provisions of the Global Compact on Refugees, the European Union has undertaken critical efforts to address the shortage of resettlement opportunities. This included: i) EU member States pledging more than 30,000 places for 2020 and to support resettlement with adequate funding, including for the emergency transit mechanisms in Niger and Rwanda, ii) the commitment to advancing the proposal for a Union Resettlement Framework, and iii) building welcoming societies, tapping into the many grassroots initiatives that proactively contribute to refugee protection and integration. Furthermore, during the Global Refugee Forum, countries covered by UNHCR's Regional Bureau for Europe pledged support to host countries through more than 132 global pledges in sectors including responsibility-sharing, solutions and protection capacity.

Community-based sponsorship initiatives are gaining momentum with pilot schemes in Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Other initiatives also emerged from communities such as: faith-based organizations across Europe proposing humanitarian corridors; States facilitating evacuation from Libya; issuance of humanitarian visa to refugees; and academia mobilizing resources to facilitate access to education opportunities in Europe.

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[2] Countries included Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Preventing and resolving situations of statelessness

The high-level segment on statelessness held at the seventieth annual session of UNHCR's Executive Committee last October marked an important milestone in addressing statelessness in Europe. Fourteen European countries delivered a total of 40 pledges, ranging from the adoption of laws that prevent statelessness at birth to accession to the statelessness conventions. Some of these commitments have already been implemented such as Malta's accession to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons and North Macedonia's accession to the 1961 Convention on the Reduction of Statelessness, in December 2019 and January 2020 respectively. In November 2019, Sweden officially withdrew reservations to the 1954 Convention along with corresponding reservations to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees.

Progress was also achieved in several European States on the prevention of statelessness at birth. Bulgaria initiated changes to the Regulations for the implementation of the Law on Foreigners allowing recognized stateless persons to obtain a permanent residence permit, while, in November, Croatia amended its Citizenship Act to include important safeguards for children born abroad who would otherwise be stateless. In October, Latvia's Parliament passed a reform that provides for the automatic granting of citizenship to children of the so-called 'non-citizens' in Latvia born after 1 January 2020.

Strengthening external relations and advocacy, and mobilizing support

Despite the continuing downward trend in new arrivals to Europe, media interest in refugees and migration remained high, and often contributed to a further polarization of public debates. At the same time, 2019 saw many expressions of solidarity at different levels including among grassroots organizations, municipalities and communities hosting refugees. UNHCR continued to engage with States, the public, media and relevant stakeholders to promote positive narratives of refugee inclusion and their potential contributions within host societies.

UNHCR continued to be an active member of the Regional United Nations Sustainable Development Group and Regional Coordination Mechanism in Europe and Central Asia. Together with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNHCR co-chaired the "Issue-based coalition on large movements of people, displacement and resilience" throughout 2019 and organized, as part of this coalition, several events, including the "Leaving no one behind" event on the margins of the Regional Forum on Sustainable Development held in Geneva in March 2019.

C. Financial information

The budget for UNHCR's activities in Europe, as approved by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme during its seventieth session in October 2019, amounted to $806.7 million for 2020.

Of the overall budget for Europe, 4 per cent is allocated to the region as a whole. At the sub-regional level, 50 per cent of the overall budget is allocated to operations in eastern Europe, 4 per cent to south-eastern Europe, and 42 per cent to central, northern, southern and western Europe.

The Central Mediterranean Situation and the Syria Situation each represent 37 per cent of the overall budget for Europe.

As of 17 January 2020, the needs for Europe of 806.7 million were 6 per cent funded when considering the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions. This leaves an indicative funding gap of $757.7 million.

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