

ESTONIA

LATVIA

LITHUANIA

2002 COUNTRY

OPERATIONS PLAN

Part I: Executive Committee Summary

Context and Beneficiary Population

The particular background of the Baltic states, having been occupied by a foreign nation for some 50 years, having received a large influx of immigrants from the former USSR and which now constitutes about one third of the population in Latvia and Estonia, having had their own national identity and language suppressed, lacking experience in democratic institutions and freedom of the press, have produced a profound impact on government officials and the public. Government institutions carried over many of their former bad practices and attitudes and were staffed with poorly paid and lowly motivated officials who were difficult to train and had a large turnover. Crossing of international borders illegally was generally considered a major offence. There is a lack of understanding of the difference between a refugee and an economic migrant and the cost of receiving refugees is often compared with the economic and social condition of poor nationals, in particular pensioners. The fact that most of the migrants do not seek asylum and those who do often after being apprehended by the police/border guards when leaving the country reinforces the common attitude that the Baltic countries are still transit countries.

However, many of the negative practices inherited from the past are now being corrected and younger staff with more liberal attitudes is being employed. As signatories of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol in 1997, and having adopted national refugee laws the same year, as well as being prospective members of the European Union, the Baltic countries are increasingly committed to providing protection and durable solutions to asylum seekers and refugees and to develop asylum systems that meet international standards. Given that the refugee legislation and procedures are not yet fully completed and that government staff responsible for implementation is in need of specific training, some problems remain to be addressed before the Baltic countries will attain international standards of their asylum systems.

Since the autumn 1998, UNHCR has been fully present in the Baltic countries with staff in the three capitals. Initially, the promotion of national refugee legislation, construction of refugee reception facilities and strengthening of NGOs involved in the RSDP, particularly the legal assistance to asylum seekers, have been the main objectives. Lately, improvement of the efficiency and fairness of the RSD procedures and identify and amend gaps in the national refugee laws have been focussed upon. The active participation by UNHCR in government working groups, initially set up within the framework of the Phare Horizontal Program (PHP) with the aim of drafting amendments to the refugee and aliens legislation in order to attain conformity with international standards, has proved to be an efficient tool.

UNHCR objectives in 2002 include further improvement of the knowledge of government and NGO staff through training activities in co-operation with the Nordic Immigration authorities, improvement of government procedures and regulations, assist the governments to formulate and implement national integration programmes for recognised refugees and persons who obtained subsidiary status.

UNHCR long standing co-operation with the Lithuanian Red Cross and CARITAS Vilnius which has resulted in substantial funding from the EU and co-operation agreements with the Lithuanian government will continue in the areas of legal and social assistance and support to the integration programme. In Estonia and Latvia, UNHCR's co-operation with the newly founded NGOs, Estonian Refugee Council and Latvian Foreigners Association, will be developed along the same pattern as in Lithuania.

The co-operation with UNDP Riga and UNDP Vilnius will be maintained at the same level as in the previous years. The diplomatic and administrative support provided by UNDP has been crucial in the establishment of UNHCR and in carrying out UNHCR mandate in the Baltic countries.

UNHCR's limited financial contribution will continue to be used in a flexible manner to cover gaps and be a catalyst for bilateral assistance or assistance from other international organisations. With the assumption that support from Nordic governments and the EU will continue and that the Baltic governments maintain their policy priority to accede to the EU, UNHCR has decided to downsize its staff and operations in the Baltic countries as many of its objectives have been met. The number of asylum seekers have further decreased and the authorities and NGOs have developed their capacities.

The Baltic countries' long aspiration to accede to the EU has further progressed in 2000 through accession negotiations aiming at membership in the period 2003-2005. This, reinforced through UNHCR's participation in the PHP process, has made the government of the Baltic countries to understand the necessity to change procedures and legislation in the asylum area and has contributed to enhance the status of UNHCR.

The beneficiary populations are the asylum seekers and recognized refugees in the three Baltic countries. Although the majority of the asylum seekers are arriving in Lithuania, they are clearly inter-linked due to the composition, migration routes and transitory character. The number of asylum seekers has remained small (less than 300 last year) and is likely to remain so. However, the relatively unstable political and economical situation in Belarus and to some degree in the Russian Federation (bordering the Baltic states to the East) may, in the worst case scenario, produce an influx of asylum seekers and economic migrants in the future.

In view of that several other organisations, such as OSCE, the EC and the Council of Baltic Sea States, are active in the promotion of legal changes and implementation of measures related to the reduction of statelessness and integration of "non-citizens" in Estonia and Latvia, a downsized UNHCR LO Riga will not assume any role in this area.

Selected Programme Goals and Objectives

The overall objective and rationale for UNHCR's presence in the three Baltic countries (Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania) is to build, in cooperation with the governments and

local NGOs, the capacity of the national institutions and organizations capable of dealing with asylum claims in a fair, efficient and self-sustainable way and to offer durable solutions to recognized refugees in accordance with internationally accepted standards.

The theme *quality asylum in a uniting Europe* summarises most of the objectives related to UNHCR's operation in the Baltic countries. To a lesser degree the theme *Statelessness* is also relevant. The goals and the strategy of UNHCR are similar in the three Baltic countries.

Theme: Quality asylum in a uniting Europe	
Goal: States will develop, and gradually harmonise, asylum systems in conformity with international standards	
Principal Objectives	Related Outputs
The gradual harmonisation of legal and procedural standards will preserve better practices and correct the deficiencies of the EU acquis.	Amendments to the current legislative instruments are adopted.
Asylum-seekers will have their claims heard fairly and promptly.	Asylum-seekers have access to a fair and efficient procedure under which eligibility for refugee status and complementary protection is granted.
Asylum relevant institutions will develop in the run-up to EU accession.	Effective and free legal assistance programmes are established to ensure that asylum-seekers interests are guaranteed in the RSD procedure.
Goal: Public opinion will be receptive to the protection needs of refugees and supportive of their integration efforts	
Principal Objectives	Related Outputs
UNHCR, as the agency responsible for refugee protection, will have a higher profile with the authorities, NGOs and media.	A higher profile of UNHCR will make UNHCR advice and interventions more forceful and contribute to the acceptance and treatment of asylum-seekers and refugees.
The public at large will understand the difference between refugees and economic migrants and be receptive towards the needs of asylum-seekers and refugees including support for integration.	A more positive public opinion will lead to better treatment of asylum-seekers and refugees and facilitate local integration and decrease xenophobia.