

URGENT ACTION

REFUGEES CONTINUE TO ENDURE BAD CONDITIONS

Following intense criticism of the authorities in Bulgaria for failing to adequately respond to the needs of refugees and migrants crossing the Bulgarian-Turkish border, there have been some improvements in the living conditions. Despite this, refugees and migrants in Bulgaria, many of whom are fleeing the Syrian armed conflict, continue to suffer due to inadequate reception conditions and deficiencies in asylum procedures.

In December 2013, Amnesty International exposed wholly inadequate living conditions at an “emergency centre” for asylum-seekers in the Bulgarian town of Harmanli. Individuals placed at the centre had to sleep in tents, dilapidated buildings and shipping containers, with almost no access to sanitation facilities. They were only provided with limited numbers of worn out foldable beds, many sleeping on thin mattresses on the floor. After fierce criticism from the international community, including Amnesty International, the Bulgarian authorities improved the conditions in Harmanli and relocated all people from tents to better buildings with heating and basic sanitation services. There is still a lack of washing facilities, with only 6 showers to be shared by 929 people as of January 2014. In the absence of government-run food supplies and cooking facilities, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has launched an emergency operation, distributing one meal per day to the residents in Harmanli. The organization, Médecins Sans Frontières has set up a health centre.

The Bulgarian authorities must still take systemic measures to respond to the numbers of refugees and migrants, by the end of 2013 over 11,600 people had entered Bulgaria irregularly, many of them in need of protection. Yet they continue to face unacceptable conditions marked by overcrowding, lack of adequate sanitation, insufficient food supplies and insufficient access to medical and psychological care. This has a particularly negative effect for those who have suffered injuries in the war, as well as pregnant women, infants and children.

Moreover, the Bulgarian asylum system fails to ensure timely and unimpeded access to asylum procedure. Refugees are being treated (and detained) as irregular migrants and are not receiving effective registration and assessment of their asylum claims.

Please write immediately in Bulgarian or your own language:

- Urging the Bulgarian authorities to ensure that the living conditions of refugees and migrants in Bulgaria meet the international human rights standards;
- Calling on the EU Member States to temporarily suspend transfers of asylum-seekers back to Bulgaria.

PLEASE SEND APPEALS BEFORE 17 FEBRUARY 2014 TO:

Minister of Interior

Tsvetlin Yovchev
Ministry of Interior
29, Shesti Septemvri Str.
Sofia 1000
Bulgaria
Fax: +3592 982 2780
Email: tyovchev@mvr.bg
Salutation: Dear Minister

President of the State Agency for

Refugees
Nikolay Chirpanliev
1233 Sofia
Serdika District
114-B Maria Luiza Blvd
Bulgaria
Fax: +3592 955 9476
Email: sar@saref.government.bg
Salutation: Dear President

Also send copies to diplomatic representatives accredited to your country. Please insert local diplomatic addresses below:

Name Address 1 Address 2 Address 3 Fax Fax number Email Email address Salutation Salutation

Please check with your section office if sending appeals after the above date. This is the first update of UA. Further information:

<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/EUR15/003/2013/en>

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

As of July 2013, the Bulgarian media has reported on the rapidly growing numbers of refugees and migrants crossing the Bulgarian border with Turkey. Whereas the total number of people crossing the border in 2012 was around 1,700, it has reached 10,200 in 2013. The increase escalated in October when 3,600 refugees and migrants entered Bulgaria – most of them were from Syria and fleeing the Syrian armed conflict, while the second largest group were Afghani nationals.

Bulgarian authorities failed to take adequate measures to respond to the large number of people arriving and hundreds of people in need of protection have ended up living for months in substandard conditions. Following his visit to Bulgaria in December 2013, the Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner, Nils Muiznieks called on the EU Member States to suspend returns of asylum seekers to Bulgaria. This call was reiterated by the UNHCR (<http://www.refworld.org/docid/52c598354.html>) on 3 January 2014 when the agency urged EU Member States participating in the Dublin Regulation to “temporarily suspend transfers of asylum-seekers back to Bulgaria.”

Under the Dublin regulation, asylum seekers can be returned from a Member State to the first country they entered upon arrival in the EU. The regulation is based on the assumption that the standards of protection of asylum-seekers are equivalent within the EU. However, the UNHCR “has concluded that asylum-seekers in Bulgaria face a genuine risk of inhuman or degrading treatment due to systemic deficiencies in reception conditions and asylum procedures.” For example, UNHCR expressed concerns that people who could be in need of protection are denied entry to Bulgaria, are being treated (and detained) as irregular migrants and are not receiving effective registration and assessment of their asylum claims.

Concerns expressed by the UNHCR and the Council of Europe echoed the findings of human rights organizations, including Amnesty International which showed that refugees and migrants in Bulgaria lack access to basic services, including food, healthcare and sanitation. UNHCR also highlighted that asylum-seekers in Bulgaria face lengthy delays in registration of their applications which subsequently deprive them of access to basic rights and puts them at risk of arbitrary detention.

In December 2013, Amnesty International published a briefing in which inadequate reception conditions for asylum-seekers in Bulgaria and expressed concerns over the failure of Bulgarian authorities to ensure timely and unimpeded access to asylum procedure were described. (<http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/asset/EUR15/002/2013/en/722a9655-1caa-4c95-b387-e238f1bd56ec/eur150022013en.pdf>)

Although Bulgarian authorities have started improving the facilities in the emergency reception centres, the refugees and migrants continue to be exposed to inadequate conditions which pose risks to their health. Bulgarian authorities must take urgent and immediate action to ensure adequate reception conditions for refugees.

Name: Refugees and migrants in in the Bulgarian town of Harmanli
Gender m/f: both

Further information on UA: 337/13 Index: EUR 15/001/2014 Issue Date: 6 January 2014