

ITALY

2002 COUNTRY

OPERATIONS PLAN

Part I: Executive Committee Summary

Background

Italy's geographical position at the center of intersecting migration routes along which tens of thousands immigrants and asylum-seekers travel every year from and through North-Africa, the Middle-East, and the Balkans is a key element in both its perception of migratory flows and of itself as a country of transit and, increasingly in the last ten years, of destination.

Given the undoubted greater relevance of immigration in comparison to asylum seeking, at least in numerical terms, it is perhaps unavoidable that illegal immigration, fight against trafficking and border control should be at the centre of the political debate in the country. Nevertheless, asylum-related issues have in the past year commanded increasing attention and a growing desire to manage the various aspects of the problem in a co-ordinated and thorough fashion.

The shift from being a country of transit for asylum-seekers, to one of destination has had a number of direct consequences: in 1990, Italy felt it necessary to lift the geographical reservation to the 1951 Convention, and give itself the first Foreigner's and Asylum Act. An Act of limited scope, it reflected the very new phenomenon of asylum in a country mostly used as a staging post towards more desirable destinations.

Since 1990, applications for refugee status have gone up from a few hundred to some 18,000 a year. While a conspicuous number of applicants still disappear during the procedure towards other European destinations, those who pursue their application in Italy have outstripped the very little capacity of the incipient system to provide protection and assistance during the much longer processing period.

Overview of current situation and plans for future

During the year 2000, one of the main areas of concern identified by UNHCR, jointly with the Minister of Interior was the need to establish an integrated asylum system able to provide a clear and predictable path for all asylum-seekers from admission to integration (or return, depending on the outcome). In the absence of adequate and explicit legislation, possible means of introducing improvements in the current system were explored in close partnership with the government. These concerned the following areas: admission, refugee status determination procedure, planned dispersal of asylum-seekers in the territory, assistance pending first instance decision, and finally integration of recognized refugees or repatriation.

Despite three years of concerted efforts by UNHCR and civil society, the asylum bill tabled by the government in 1998 and substantially strengthened by the inclusion of many amendments developed by a working group led by UNHCR, was not approved before the dissolution of Parliament in early 2001. The slow process of this bill through Parliament was evidence of the peculiarities of the Italian political system and of the relatively low priority the government set on it - and this despite repeated and

forceful calls from UNHCR, Churches, and NGOs. A key element of the asylum system, namely comprehensive legislation, therefore remains missing, to the detriment both of asylum-seekers/refugees and officials called to manage the issue at a practical level. The passing of such a bill therefore remains a priority on UNHCR's agenda.

Significant improvements in admission procedures are expected from the entry into force of an administrative instruction implementing a hitherto dormant clause in the Immigration Act, which provides for the establishment of information and assistance centers at main border points. The centres are under the responsibility of local prefectures, which may enter into agreement with NGOs for their running. The information centres so established will be linked up to reception centres to avoid the current problem of admission to the territory without the certainty of reception somewhere. UNHCR is closely involved both in the drafting of the administrative regulations and the setting up of operational criteria. A dozen border posts, including all major international airports and ports, have been identified.

The refugee status determination procedure is under close observation to identify procedural shortcuts which may allow faster and more efficient processing - the aim being an average first instance waiting period of three months. Initial measures introduced have already brought about an average reduction of waiting time by one-two months. At the same time, changes in the Central Commission structure would be required to match the challenges posed by the increased and diverse caseload. UNHCR has finalised a number of proposals that, if accepted, will be translated into a working plan encompassing the drafting of new regulations and training.

Important steps forward have been made toward the establishment of a comprehensive asylum system with the development of a National Asylum Programme. In the absence of an adequate asylum law, responsibility for assistance and reception of asylum-seekers was allocated to central and local authorities according to rather unclear and often presumptive criteria. Furthermore, no standard assistance criteria were identified. To remedy the situation, the Ministry of Interior, in collaboration with UNHCR and ANCI (Association of Municipalities) through the signing of a MOI, has developed a National Asylum Programme. The three partners are responsible for planning the necessary assistance to asylum-seekers and refugees, at the country level; and co-ordinate the implementation of the projects through the Municipalities.

The Municipalities are now fully invested with the responsibility of assistance and provided the means to do so, either directly or via entering into agreements with NGOs. Most importantly, the criteria set for the projects under this programme are meant to cover a whole range of activities, from reception to legal assistance, language and professional training, induction to the labour market, etc. in an integrated fashion.

The funds thus mobilised proceed from the Ministry of Interior tax-payer's concession project ("8 per mile" fund from IRPEF, already approved by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers), and the European Refugee Fund's resources allocated to Italy, etc., and will in future be supplemented by other sources of funding, such as the EU Equal programme, the National Immigration Funds, EU structural funds, etc.

At a broader level, faced with the responsibility of guarding a particularly exposed stretch of EU border against a perceived tidal wave of would-be irregular entrants, Italy has devoted very considerable resources to border control (some 110,000 rejections/expulsions served in 2000) and to the promotion of, and active participation in, international activities against smuggling and trafficking.

Four objectives have characterised the GOI immigration policy:

1. programming of legal entries within the framework of quotas fixed each year;
2. developing of efficient measures to counter illegal immigration and its criminal exploitation;
3. providing a more concrete support to the integration of immigrants officially residing in Italy;
4. developing a policy of co-operation with countries of origin and transit of illegal immigrants (partly in the form of "readmission agreements").

The above immigration policy is sometimes perceived merely as a police and immigration matter to the detriment of their linkages to asylum. The same preoccupation transpires in the large number of readmission agreements concluded with migrant-producing countries. UNHCR feels that protection-related concerns need to be more carefully taken into account and woven into these processes, and plans to steps up its efforts to see them recognised.

Institutional support, capacity building, PARINAC

Institutional support is part and parcel of UNHCR Rome's strategy to strengthen the asylum system. During the year 2000 and the first 3 months of the 2001, the Office ran a large number of training activities aimed at the Police and Public Administrators both at the central and local level. The outcome has been extremely positive, and beside helping changing attitudes and supplying theoretical and operational tools to better deal with asylum-specific issues, it has increased UNHCR's visibility and acceptance of its role. The training, however, targets a wide and revolving audience, and needs to be regularly repeated and updated. In this context, the inclusion of a formal UNHCR presence in the regular courses organised by the Scuola Superiore dell'Amministrazione dell'Interno and by the Scuola Superiore della Polizia di Frontiera for their officials represents a particularly welcome development.

With the signature of the MOU between the Ministry of Interior, ANCI and UNHCR, capacity building targeting public administrators and associations, will be one of the priorities for the future in order to systematise knowledge and management of asylum issues. Training and widespread promotion aiming at improving standards of assistance, integration and other durable solutions, with a particular focus on vulnerable cases (victims of trauma, separated children and refugee women), will be diffused through the municipalities and NGO networks in Italy.

In addition, UNHCR sees the need to build more awareness of European processes among government officials and mainly local authorities. It seems particularly important that officials both at policy and administrative level take a more direct interest in the development of EU thinking on harmonisation of the asylum system

and of its practical implications for Italy. UNHCR will continue, and reinforce, its lobbying activities, advocacy work, and training activities with government actors, parliamentarians, NGOs and universities, in order to promote adequate standards of asylum in Italy and at the European level.

As part of its overall institutional role in support of the Government of Italy's efforts to improve the quality of asylum in Italy, UNHCR is endeavouring to strengthen the capabilities of concerned NGOs, with a view to developing a range of diverse and competent interlocutors country-wide for both local administrators and, at central level, the government. The challenge is to encourage real partnership and a co-operative approach between NGOs themselves in the first place, and between NGOs and the institutions in the second.

NGOs have a very important role to play in advocacy and assistance to asylum seekers. During 2000, UNHCR sought to diversify its NGO partners, endeavouring to build capacity with a view to involving and strengthening competent NGOs. Several NGOs have shown interest and commitment to presenting increasingly professional projects, and to upgrading their competencies. This close relationship benefited from a discussion group created to work on the asylum bill (the group produced several amendments and spent much effort in lobbying for the adoption of the bill) which developed into an ever more constructive partnership as UNHCR and NGOs embarked not only on training and awareness campaigns, but also on project design and development for assistance programme. While the sailing has not been always smooth, particularly when UNHCR's activities were seen in contrast with established preferential channels and positions of privilege, there are definite positive signs of a development of a strong and diverse NGO presence.

Public Information as a tool for increasing support and visibility for refugees

Public Information is an extremely successful domain for UNHCR Rome. It is noted that Italian media have an extraordinary influence on the Government's decisions, and powerfully drive public opinion's reactions on specific issues. In this environment, a full fledged programme and an energetic Public Information presence is essential for the following: to bring to the fore asylum-related issues; to gain media support for refugee matters; to better represent to the public the plight of the refugees in Italy but also world-wide; to keep the public informed on humanitarian crises producing refugees and on UNHCR's positions and needs; to increase awareness and concrete support.

Public Information has permitted the Office to gain visibility and high exposure, when required. Its prompt reaction has enabled the Office to become a source of information for Italian media on asylum related issues and refugee crises. Public information work focused on, among other things, developing TV and radio co-productions on refugee conditions in Italy and abroad resulted in an excellent awareness tool. Press Conferences organised by UNHCR, with the participation of high level Italian Government representatives, have not only enormously improved public understanding of refugee issues and problems, but also contributed to promote initiatives and activities undertaken by the Government of Italy, local authorities, Associations, and UNHCR.

The successful celebration of the 50th anniversary on 14 December 2000, with the participation of prominent members of the Government was proof of the confidence and mutual understanding established between the Italian Government and UNHCR in Italy. On this occasion UNHCR presented to a large public the Italian version of "The Status of the World's Refugees". The report was produced by the Prime Minister's Office free of charge. 20,000 copies - the highest number of copies among the different linguistic versions – were printed and distributed to national institutions, parliamentarians, universities, schools, media, NGOs, etc.

The general public as well as the Government have always shown appreciation for UNHCR public information activities and awareness campaigns. Awareness activities are high on the agenda of UNHCR Rome, and have proved an excellent and by and large very cost-effective way to increase the visibility of asylum-related issues and garner consensus. Along with participation in a broad variety of public events, PI activities for the general public include, among others, the implementation of awareness campaigns through the media, the production and distribution of 50,000 copies of the Italian version of the magazine Refugees, the production of new and specific information material aimed at different target groups (children, teenagers, media etc.). At a more academic level, Public information activities are also aimed at University students and participation in conferences and courses is part of the Office routine work.

Private Sector Fund Raising in Italy: A Success Story

With over US\$ 4.5 million, Private Sector in Italy has been ranked, for the second consecutive year, at the top of the list of private sector donors. This has been achieved thanks to the generosity of thousands of individual donors and some major corporations.

The private sector fund-raising effort in Italy began in 1993 and the primary targets were individual donors. At the beginning, only a few hundred donors contributed a total of a few thousand dollars. Today, there are over 360,000 registered donors. Over the past six years PSFR in Italy have totalled over \$30 million. Directed from the Branch Office, PSFR in Italy has developed a strong expertise in emergency appeals, special events, and direct mailing and donor management.

The Italian Energy Company, **Eni/Agip**, provided one of the largest corporate contributions ever received by UNHCR. This \$2.2 million gift supports the Local Settlement of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugees in Azerbaijan Project. PSFR Rome has also developed a special relationship with the Italian clothing manufacturer **Benetton** on both public awareness and fund-raising. A book of photographs on Kosovar refugees; a full issue of their *Colours* magazine focusing on refugees in Tanzania; were some of Benetton more appreciated contributions of last year.

For the current year, the Office has secured the support of Maestro Luciano Pavarotti, who will dedicate his annual charity concert to the benefit of Afghan refugee children. **Pavarotti&Friends** have already pledged US\$ 1.5 million for education and health

projects in Pakistan. This event will represent a unique fund-raising opportunity for further increase the public's awareness for the victims of Afghanistan's long conflict.

The possibilities for increasing and expanding the Private Sector Fund Raising in Italy are enormous. It is important to point out that UNHCR in Italy has finally obtained Tax Deductibility for its donors. The provision is retroactive to 1999 donations and it is also a clear signal of the support that the Italian Government is paying to UNHCR's Mandate world-wide.

The Government of Italy: a potential strong and reliable donor

UNHCR enjoys a transparent and supportive relationship with the Government of Italy. Italy's active participation to UNHCR Governance forums and to the Informal Consultations on the resourcing of the organisation has been built thanks to the high level contacts developed by UNHCR at both HQs and in Rome. Intensive contacts between the Government and UNHCR carried out during 2000 brought Government contributions up from US\$ 6 million to US\$ 10 million with the assurance that this level would be maintained. Italy has increased its support to the UN emergency operations with the opening of a UN Logistic Base in Brindisi and has offered UNHCR to join the operation. In this framework, the Emergency Bilateral Fund to UNHCR was restored with an initial donation of US\$ 893,447, which will be entirely spent by April 2001. The replenishment of this fund is expected to take place, before the end of the year 2001. More is being done and can be pursued in the future through a well-thought working strategy at the highest level, to impress upon the Italian Government the need for stronger responsibility sharing of the world-wide refugee problem and therefore for stronger financial support to UNHCR.