

Strasbourg, 30 July 2014

## **UNHCR welcomes entry into force of the Istanbul Convention and encourages worldwide accession**

“Sexual and gender-based violence being one of the top protection risks faced by persons of concern of all nationalities, backgrounds, and identities, I congratulate the Council of Europe and its Member States for the entry into force on 1 August 2014 of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention) as a major protection tool”, states Gert Westerveen, UNHCR Representative to the European Institutions in Strasbourg.

In 2013, across the world, more than 51 million people are persecuted and forcibly displaced because of wars or human rights violations. Women and girls represent nearly half of this population.

Sexual and gender-based violence affects mostly women and girls. Many of their asylum claims involve fear of gender-based persecution, including trafficking for sexual and labour exploitation, forced marriage, forced sterilization, domestic violence, female genital mutilation, the threat of “honour” crimes, sexual violence and rape.

The recent *Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict* in London helped to shed light on this scourge and galvanized public support. In 2013, some 12,000 sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) incidents were reported to UNHCR in 43 countries worldwide. One can assume much higher numbers given the many obstacles faced by survivors in reporting what happened to them and the ordeal they often face when they manage to do so. Sexual and gender-based violence is exacerbated in times of conflict; driven by pre-existing attitudes and social norms, including those based in gender inequality and power imbalances.

All too often when applying the United Nations 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, States fail to acknowledge a gender-sensitive dimension which may result in inconsistent asylum decisions and deprive many women and girls of international protection.

Importantly, the Istanbul Convention requires states parties to ensure that gender-based violence against women may be recognized as a form of persecution and to ensure that the grounds for asylum listed in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees are interpreted in a gender-sensitive manner. Furthermore, the Istanbul Convention establishes the obligation to introduce gender-sensitive procedures, guidelines and support services in the asylum process. The Convention also reiterates the obligation to respect the principle of *non-refoulement* and requires states parties to adopt measures to ensure that victims of violence against women, who are in need of protection,

regardless of their status or residence, are not returned to any country where their life would be at risk or where they may be subjected to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

“The Istanbul Convention is designed to become a global protection tool because also non-European states can accede to the Convention. The Istanbul Convention requires States Parties to adopt legislative and practical measures to effectively prevent and combat violence against women and domestic violence, as well as to co-ordinate measures through comprehensive policies. This is why all States should accede to it and implement it”, concludes Gert Westerveen, UNHCR Representative to the European Institutions in Strasbourg.

### **UNHCR Representation to the European Institutions in Strasbourg**

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