

UNHCR Recommendations for Greece in 2017



Although progress has been made, significant challenges related to reception, registration, asylum processing, and solutions remain, giving rise to significant protection and safety risks. These ongoing gaps can be addressed if a set of concrete measures are adopted in 2017 to address these serious gaps in what should be a manageable situation.

UNHCR is calling for concrete measures to be adopted by the Greek authorities, the EU and its Member States and will continue to provide support for these measures. These measures seek to ensure adequate care, support and solutions for the women, men and children seeking asylum in Greece, with particular attention to those with specific needs. The goal must be to transition from the current emergency response to a situation in 2017 that ensures properly functioning systems are in place to deal with those in Greece and as well as those still arriving. UNHCR is committed to continue to support the Greek authorities towards the achievement of this goal.

UNHCR is calling for the following concrete actions:

1 Ensure capacity to register and process asylum claims:

Six months after their arrival on the Greek islands many asylum-seekers are still waiting for the full registration and processing of their asylum claims. Discriminatory practices, which delay the registration of claims of some nationalities (such as Afghans and Iraqis), are not in line with EU and Greek standards. On the mainland, first instance decisions for those pre-registered during the summer of 2016 will take approximately two years. The lack of capacity to fully process asylum claims within a reasonable timeframe needs to be addressed. It directly contributes to the significant tensions in many of the asylum-seeker sites, generates onward movement and prevents working towards the implementation of solutions. In addition, the Greek State should ensure the reference in law, and full application in practice, of Article 31 of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and strictly limit the use of restriction of liberty for new arrivals for the absolute minimum time necessary for identification and registration, with the exception of children who should never be detained. UNHCR recommends that the Asylum Service, in close cooperation with EASO and UNHCR, urgently develops a comprehensive plan for the strengthening of the institutions allowing for the rapid full registration and processing of asylum claims in accordance with the requirements of the Asylum Procedures Directive (APD) and Greek law.

2 Address serious gaps on the islands immediately:

Keeping people on the islands in overcrowded, inadequate and insecure conditions is inhumane and must no longer be maintained. The goal in 2017 must be to quickly process asylum claims and increase transfers to the mainland, reducing the number of those who would need to be accommodated. For this to be accomplished three measures need to be quickly implemented: 1) increase the number and pace of registration, (UNHCR is ready to provide support in this regard), and the processing of asylum claims of all nationalities (see 1 above); 2) significantly increase the number of people transferred to the mainland; and 3) significantly improve reception conditions, including adequate measures for people with specific needs and the provision of greater security in all centres and sites, which must be maintained as open facilities.

3 A plan is put in place for a sustainable and adequate reception system on the mainland:

To ensure adequate and safe reception conditions and capacity in Greece, sites that are clearly not suitable for human habitation, mainly warehouses in the Central Macedonia region and the remaining informal site in Attica region (Elliniko), should be closed immediately and people must be transferred to other more suitable accommodation. A longer term plan is needed from the Greek authorities, with the support of key donors, clearly defining a strategy and responsibilities for the accommodation of asylum-seekers and refugees. This plan should include a transition to a sustainable reception system that builds on the good practice of accommodation progressively reducing the use of larger sites. UNHCR, with EU funding, has created, over 20,000 accommodation places for relocation candidates and asylum seekers with specific needs, mostly through apartments, renovated buildings, hotels and host families. The use of this type of accommodation in urban areas, also for asylum-seekers, should be part of the plan and increasingly handed over to the competent authorities (RIS, EKKA and municipalities) as their areas of competence and institutional capacity are being strengthened.

4 Provide adequate care for children:

Children are exposed to on-going protection risks, including sexual exploitation and abuse, due to insufficient security, sub-standard and overcrowded reception sites, lack of specific services and non-sufficient access to formal or non-formal education, and lengthy asylum procedures for reuniting families, which also severely impacts their psychosocial well-being. The national capacity for accommodating unaccompanied and separated children (UASC) is still far from meeting the needs – roughly half of the approximately 2,100* UASC in Greece currently do not receive adequate or appropriate care (UNHCR is supporting accommodation for half of the existing accommodation places for UASC in Greece). Moreover, greater emphasis is needed for the creation of other types of alternative care, e.g. foster families (care systems in host families – local or refugee families) and supervised independent living for older children (smaller group care for those 16-17 years old), where children would be placed based on their best interests. Accompanied and unaccompanied children are in some circumstances detained in closed reception or police facilities, sometimes with adults. Children should not be placed in detention and suitable accommodation is needed. UNHCR will continue to work with the authorities in ensuring that children at risk, including UASC, are receiving specialized support in their best interest. This includes the identification and appropriate assessment of the age (if in doubt), assessment of the best interest and tracing of the family, referral, follow up, and provision of targeted services, as well as providing appropriate care and child friendly information on all relevant issues. UNHCR urges the enactment of the proposed law on guardianship to be adopted, which is a positive step forward for the protection of UASC, and the provision of funding for its implementation. Best Interest Determination (BID) procedures need to become an integral part of the child protection system in Greece.

5 Prevention and response to Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV):

The conditions in a number of sites in Greece, including the lack of adequate security, expose women, men, boys, and girls to sexual violence, abuse, and exploitation as well as domestic violence. Limited livelihood opportunities further amplify the risk of sexual exploitation, trafficking, survival sex and early/forced marriages. The identification of, referral and availability of services for survivors of SGBV (including children) is insufficient. A three pronged approach is needed: 1) Prevention of SGBV through the establishment of sites with adequate minimum reception standards and effective mechanisms for prevention of SGBV, including enhanced safety and security; 2) Early identification of SGBV survivors and systematic referrals to immediate assistance and adequate protection channels for response according to their needs and wishes; and 3) Ensuring quality and sufficient coverage of service provision, including legal, medical, psychosocial support, and access to safe houses for SGBV survivors. UNHCR will work with the authorities and the different communities on these efforts.

6 Improve coordination and establish clear responsibilities:

The Greek Government, and the Ministry of Migration Policy (MoMP) in particular, need to establish clear coordination structures with all humanitarian stakeholders to ensure a coherent and efficient response where gaps are addressed, overlap avoided and resources optimized and ensure the timely development of contingency plans and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) to handle critical events. This would allow UNHCR and other humanitarian actors to move out of the current ad hoc response mode, as witnessed in the winterization response, and encourage continued confidence from the donor community in the humanitarian response in Greece. An action plan should be developed by the MoMP clearly indicating expected roles and responsibilities. Further linkages between the institutional entities in charge of responding to the arrival, reception, and stay of asylum-seekers in Greece need to be developed (Reception and Identification Service, Asylum Service, EKKA, key line Ministries, and Municipalities). UNHCR will support the authorities in building the needed linkages to overcome current fragmentation within the systems, as well as continue to support capacity building of the institutions within their respective areas of competence.

7 Increase pace and number of people relocated and reunited with family members in other countries:

For the situation to significantly improve and for the establishment of a normalized system of reception and asylum in Greece, EU Member States should commit to an increase in the number and pace of people to be reunited with their families and relocated under the relocation scheme agreed in 2015. As of 20 March*, 10,012 of the 66,400 original target have been relocated from Greece to other EU Member States. A substantial increase in the number of people accessing these solutions starting in early 2017 would have a positive impact on the whole system, allowing resources and capacity to focus on the asylum and reception systems for those who will be staying in Greece and for new arrivals. UNHCR urges EU Member States to accelerate family reunion and make a commitment to reach an additional minimum 20,000 asylum-seekers relocated by the end of the year.

8 Self-reliance and integration:

Together with the relevant Greek authorities and other humanitarian partners UNHCR will develop and implement a cash assistance programme to phase out in kind assistance and increase self-reliance opportunities for asylum-seekers. Investment is also needed, including with support of key donors, to support refugees who will stay in Greece to achieve meaningful self-reliance and integrate into the host community. This will require investment in promoting effective access to social welfare services, existing language and orientation courses, vocational training and job placement programmes, or in expanding such services and programmes. Further investment is also necessary to support host communities to enhance positive relations with refugees. In this regard, UNHCR has proposed that all EU Member States be required to allocate at least 30 per cent of their annual EU Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) to support integration each year. UNHCR stands ready to support the development by the competent Greek Authorities, including municipalities, of a comprehensive action plan for the integration of refugees, with a focus on targeted post-recognition support matching refugees' specific needs. Efforts are needed to continue to build on the positive community engagement and support from Greek civil society and volunteers. Moreover, efforts on integration should also build on the contributions and critical role played by municipalities, local authorities and volunteers across Greece society.

*Data for UASC and relocation has been updated as of March.