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## Poland: Chechen Refugees Grateful for Protection but Need Integration Support

Civilians continue to flee ongoing violence and suffering in Chechnya.

Asylum seekers who are able to make it out say they are thankful for Poland's open door policy, and the country is certainly to be commended for extending its arm of protection to them. Once the immediate safety of these individuals has been realized, however, they need help restarting their lives in a new country.

Chechnya declared independence in 1991. Within a few years, conflict between federal forces and secessionist armed groups had displaced over 250,000 people to other parts of Chechnya, and to neighboring Ingushetia, Dagestan, and North Ossetia. After a ceasefire was declared in 1996, many of the displaced returned home. When conflict broke out again in the autumn of 1999, more people fled Chechnya to Ingushetia and Georgia. Russian operations in Chechnya have not ceased. But pressure from the local authorities has forced the closure of tent camps in Ingushetia and the return of some refugees. Large numbers of individuals remain displaced inside Chechnya; some live in Georgia and Azerbaijan; others live with host families or in squatter settlements in nearby Ingushetia; and still others have escaped to other parts of Europe.

According to recent statistics of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Russian Federation followed only Serbia and Montenegro, and tied with China, as the leading country of origin for asylum applicants during the first six months of 2005. While the number of applicants has declined since 2004, it remains substantial at 9,400 persons, with the largest percentage of applications filed in Poland. But the situation for Chechens trying to restart their lives in Poland is not easy.

"It's tough living here," a young Chechen woman told Refugees International. "Refugees need support to integrate, and they also need access to healthcare services." There are an estimated 3,400 Chechen refugees in Poland, and about 50

to 60 percent of them are children. The majority of the population is spread among 16 reception camps, about half of which are near Warsaw, with the remainder in the eastern part of the country. RI was told by the refugees that a few asylum seekers have been forcibly returned to Belarus. The majority of the asylum seekers, however, are permitted to stay on humanitarian grounds, a status called "tolerated stay." While Poland's Ministry of the Interior has recently started to provide a small amount of cash aid to recognized refugees, it is about a third of what it costs to rent housing. "Tolerated" individuals do not receive assistance, and this is the group most in need of support. In a society facing a 19 percent unemployment rate, it is extremely difficult for the new residents to obtain jobs.

The refugees are clear about what they see as their challenges as well as the remedies that could be undertaken to improve the situation. "We want a body to look into the problems of Chechen refugees in Poland and throughout Europe," the refugees say. "The Dublin II Agreement [which determines the EU state responsible for examination of the asylum application] should be stopped and re-analyzed by the EU. And if this country can't guarantee basic benefits, we should not be made to stay here. We need advice on legal matter and help getting travel documents."

Mental health issues of Chechen asylum seekers and refugees are often left unattended. "Many families, especially children, have suffered a lot and need psychological care as well," a refugee reminded RI. There are presently only a handful of psychologists working with Chechen asylum seekers in Poland. For individuals who need psychiatric treatment, lack of Russian-speaking doctors is an additional hurdle to receiving care. International and local non-governmental organizations run some programs for children, such as language classes, but they are not offered on a regular basis or at all centers.

Every person has the right to seek and enjoy protection, and no one should be forcibly returned to a country where they fear for their safety or well-being. Poland, a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol, has honored the basic rights of most Chechens who approach the country for protection. While the solution to the problem is an immediate resolution of the on-going conflict and cessation of human rights violations in Chechnya, a small increase in Poland's integration support would go a long way to easing the conditions of their protracted stays in camps and during their initial period of resettlement. Support is essential for those who are successful in their asylum claims, as they are required to leave their camps on short notice and secure accommodations and employment with few resources and very limited language skills; individuals being "tolerated" also require assistance.

#### **REFUGEES INTERNATIONAL RECOMMENDS:**

- ❑ Poland's policy of opening its doors to individuals seeking international protection be widely recognized and commended.
- ❑ Poland conduct a full evaluation of the legal, employment, education, physical and mental health, accommodation, social, and language issues faced by Chechen refugees and then develop and fund sustainable programs to support them.
- ❑ The UNHCR undertake an examination of the situation of Chechen refugees throughout Europe and pro-actively seek to assist governments who have opened their borders to them, and to close any gaps in protection and assistance.
- ❑ Poland and other EU governments initiate public relation campaigns to encourage tolerance of foreigners, especially refugees and hold programs for refugees to demonstrate the benefits of staying in Poland.
- ❑ European governments finance and cooperate with a UNHCR initiative to protect and improve the quality of life of Chechen asylum seekers.
- ❑ The government of Poland and UNHCR work together to provide travel documents for individuals who lack them.

*Refugees International Director of Research Maureen Lynch interviewed Chechen refugees in Poland in September 2005.*