

AUSTRIA

COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN 2003

Executive Committee Summary

(a) Context and Theme

In 2003, the UNHCR Branch Office in Vienna will focus on two completely different operations:

- The country operation in Austria.
- Liaison with the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).

UNHCR's role in **Austria** is closely linked to its protection mandate and lies in the promotion of a fair and functioning asylum system through the monitoring of political and legislative developments. This will entail close co-operation with all actors of the asylum system, including the first and second instance decision making bodies, higher court judges, parliamentarians, NGOs etc. In the present climate of suspicion and negativism towards asylum seekers and refugees it is, moreover, necessary to promote respect and tolerance for this group of persons.

Austria is an EU Member State and therefore it is a policy priority to lobby with the relevant Government counterparts for UNHCR's positions in the EU harmonisation process.

BO Vienna's **liaison function with the OSCE** is to be seen in the framework of partnerships. The OSCE and its institutions are important strategic partners for UNHCR in areas of common interest, i.e. refugees and returnees; prevention/reduction of statelessness; internal displacement and gender-related violence etc. UNHCR is likewise valued by the OSCE as an effective operational partner. The co-operation is built on trust and mutual respect for the diversity of mandates. UNHCR/OSCE partnership rests on a solid basis but will need nurturing and efforts to be maintained.

(b) Main Goals and Principal Objectives

UNHCR's overall goal in **Austria**, as in most Western European countries, will be the preservation and, if possible, the improvement of the existing asylum system. In order to achieve this, BO Vienna has identified several priority areas for action. These include, inter alia:

- ◆ Monitoring of borders (land and airport) in order to assure that measures to combat illegal migration do not prevent the access to territory for persons in need of international protection.
- ◆ Staff resources permitting, monitoring of the first and second instance asylum authorities in order to ensure that asylum claims are heard promptly and fairly.
- ◆ Special attention will be given to the situation of separated children, their reception conditions and standing in the asylum procedure.
- ◆ A strategy will be devised to counter intolerance and discrimination against asylum seekers and refugees and to promote their integration into Austrian society.
- ◆ A special focus will remain on lobbying activities towards EU harmonisation in the JHA area.

Austria will have Parliamentary elections in 2003 with the inherent danger that foreigners (including asylum seekers and refugees) will again be a target of hate statements, which might have a negative impact on the above objectives.

For the **UNHCR-OSCE Strategic Partnership** the overall goal is to solicit political support for UNHCR's protection concerns and to offer to the OSCE in turn our expertise and advisory capacities. To this end BO Vienna has identified the following objectives:

- ◆ Identify and develop all areas of UNHCR-OSCE co-operation, enhancing the protection of refugees and displaced persons, the prevention of statelessness and the identification of durable solutions.
- ◆ Develop closer contacts with **ODIHR** and **HCNM** and give support to their specific mandated activities (consolidating democratic institutions and human rights, strengthen civil society and the rule of law, seeking early resolution of ethnic tensions, protection of minority rights etc.).
- ◆ Support UNHCR's field operations by giving timely information on OSCE priorities and advocate for concerns at field level with the OSCE and its institutions.
- ◆ Advocate with OSCE member States to pay heed, inter alia, that measures to combat irregular migration and measures to fight against terrorism include adequate safeguards to guarantee the rights of asylum seekers and refugees.

In all pertinent areas BO Vienna will develop closer links with the Training function and the PI function within the OSCE.