



COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN

OVERVIEW

**Baltic/Nordic Region:
Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland,
Latvia, Lithuania, Norway and Sweden**

Planning Year: 2006

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Part I: OVERVIEW

1. Protection and socio-economic operational environment

The overall goal and rationale for UNHCR's presence and involvement in the eight countries of the Baltic/Nordic region are: 1) to advocate accessible, fair and efficient asylum procedures in asylum law, policy and practice as well as improvement of the quality of national asylum systems in line with international protection standards; 2) to support the governments in their integration efforts; 3) to maintain and increase the level of support to UNHCR from governments, the general public and the private sector.

The eight countries in the region by no means form a homogenous group. For example, they have chosen different paths in foreign policy. Six of them are EU members. Iceland and Norway are however linked via participation in the Schengen *acquis*, Dublin II, Eurodac and Eurojust. Finland and Sweden have stayed outside military alliances while all the others are NATO members.

All the Nordics and increasingly the Baltics maintain formal and informal contacts through various fora (e.g. the Nordic Council and the Council of Baltic Sea States) in order to consult and work towards a harmonisation of approaches to asylum, migration and related foreign relations, development and security issues. Of immediate import for UNHCR, each country in the region has developed different administrative set-ups and approaches to asylum matters, depending on that particular country's historical background and political environment. Again, there is a common striving towards unified asylum policies on the basis of the EU *acquis* although the EU countries of the region are approaching the transposition phase from different starting points with regard to the quality of their asylum systems.

UNHCR has observed over the last years that asylum policies and practices of the countries in the region have become increasingly narrow and restrictive, mirroring a general trend in western Europe. There has been coupled with a hardening of attitudes in the the public discourse, in media and elsewhere.

Another issue of concern to UNHCR is the number of stateless persons in the region, given the fact that statelessness is part of UNHCR's global mandate. Cross-border issues remain topical, especially within the framework of the Söderköping process which is seeking enhanced cross-border cooperation between the Western Newly Independent States and the EU.

The Nordic countries have traditionally been open to granting refugees permission to stay although the rate of Convention recognition has remained low. In line with developments in western Europe, the Nordic countries have recently experienced a drop in the number of

asylum-seekers. The number of asylum-seekers arriving in the Baltic countries remains modest.

The Nordic countries all belong to the group of UNHCR resettlement countries and have comparatively generous resettlement programmes. They are the only countries that take emergency resettlement cases on very short notice. Urgent cases such as medical cases and women-at-risk cases are taken in on Nordic quotas.

The Baltic and Nordic countries have traditionally been supportive of UNHCR with regard to its global mandate, the global protection situation, funding and EU-related issues. This has been reflected in the level of their contributions to UNHCR. In 2004 the contributions of the five Nordic countries (USD 177 million) amounted to 18 per cent of all contributions to UNHCR programmes. In contrast to most other donors Nordic contributions continue to be either unearmarked, or lightly earmarked, which gives UNHCR a welcome degree of flexibility. In the field of assistance during emergencies the Nordic countries account for a significant proportion of UNHCR's standby arrangements. The three Baltic countries, having recently become UNHCR donors, are increasing their contributions.

Private sector fundraising in the region remains a promising market. Contributions from the private sector in the Nordic countries has increased from insignificant numbers in 2000 to USD 529,000 in 2004.

2. Operational goals and potential for durable solutions

Derived from UNHCR's Global strategic objectives and the UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe (RBE) Priorities for 2006 and Strategic Framework 2005-2010, the following are the overall strategic goals of the 2006 programme of the UNHCR Regional Office for the Baltic and Nordic Countries (ROBNC).

Goal 1: Persons seeking asylum have access to the territories of the States of the Baltic/Nordic region.

- UNHCR is able to monitor cases of potential *refoulement* and the Office's interventions in individual cases are respected.
- Access to territory and asylum determination procedures for asylum-seekers are guaranteed. The use of safe country returns including Dublin returns and manifestly unfounded procedures comply with the law and are reasonably limited in practice. Asylum-seekers are provided with adequate safeguards including access to information and legal advice, and refugee and protection status decision-making is timely and well-informed. UNHCR, directly or via NGO partners, is able to monitor the accessibility of asylum procedures. The Office's interventions in problematic cases are respected.
- Border officials in those countries with the most needs are trained in basic protection standards and guidelines. A pocket manual for border guards is produced and disseminated throughout the region.

- ROBNC has full access to reception and detention facilities. Shortcomings and ways and means of developing available facilities consistent with international standards are identified.

Goal 2: The quality of asylum systems is safeguarded and misuse of asylum procedures is avoided.

- Refugee Status Determination (RSD) procedures continue to be developed and applied in accordance with UNHCR protection policies and positions, with special emphasis on particular groups of refugees and asylum-seekers, as well as a more balanced application of Convention criteria.
- The quality of RSD processes in the Baltic/Nordic region is improved through capacity-building and training activities of decision-makers at all levels. The Office's interventions in precedent-setting cases are respected.
- ROBNC's comments on legislative and policy changes on asylum and asylum-related issues are sought and taken into account. The use of broader forms of protection criteria under the UN Convention Against Torture and the European Convention on Human Rights for failed asylum-seekers are applied and further developed. ROBNC interventions in individual precedent-setting cases on these and other protection-related matters are respected.
- ROBNC's comments on modifications in national legislations to incorporate relevant EU Council Directives regarding provisions for complementary protection and temporary protection are sought and taken into account. Access to individual RSD procedures is guaranteed to those who do not wish to repatriate at the end of Temporary Protection.
- Return arrangements and policies for rejected asylum-seekers take into account UNHCR protection directives and policy advice. All relevant actors are kept fully updated on relevant UNHCR guidelines. ROBNC interventions in individual cases are respected.

Goal 3: Asylum systems and practices are responsive to issues of gender and age.

- National authorities take proper account of gender and age-related forms of persecution. These priority issues are mainstreamed in policy fora, interventions in individual cases and capacity/training activities with government and NGO counterparts. Media understand the need to ensure a proper appreciation and application of these perspectives.
- Guidelines on RSD procedures for asylum-seeking women and children and traumatised asylum-seekers are adopted and implemented by national authorities. The best practices of the Nordic countries are incorporated in regional training activities and outreach.

Goal 4: Xenophobia and racism towards refugees and asylum-seekers decrease and the integration of refugees is effectively promoted.

- The level of awareness about refugee issues among the general public increases and the amount of misinformation or misunderstandings regarding refugees and asylum-seekers in the public debate and media decreases.
- Domestic integration policies and practices continue to be supported by governments and NGOs. Laws and policies which concern family reunification as well as access to educational facilities and the labour force are implemented.

Goal 5: Asylum policies are informed by a spirit of solidarity and burden-sharing.

- Nordic governments maintain, if not increase, their resettlement quotas. The Nordic EU countries support EC and UNHCR initiatives to promote a pan-European resettlement programme. The Baltic States take the first steps towards joining the group of resettlement countries.

Goal 6: Refugee protection in the EU is enhanced through the development of a common asylum system that conforms to international standards.

- States accept UNHCR policy guidelines and implement practices in line with international standards. Best practices from the region are used as a model by other EU countries.
- UNHCR's voice is heard in the process of adoption and transposition of relevant EU Council Directives as well as fair application of third country return practices under the Dublin instruments and readmission agreements.

Goal 7: The protection and assistance needs of persons displaced by conflicts in Eastern and South-Eastern Europe are met.

- Chechen asylum-seekers are treated in accordance with relevant UNHCR guidelines in all Baltic/Nordic countries.

Goal 8: Durable solutions are implemented for refugees and displaced populations and further displacement is avoided. (Not applicable in the Baltic/Nordic setting.)

Goal 9: Statelessness is reduced and effective solutions for stateless persons are identified.

- All States in the region accede to the statelessness instruments. Partnerships are developed in order to discuss and address issues of statelessness in particularly the Baltic states. ROBNC's interventions in policy discussions and as appropriate individual cases where protection for stateless individuals is a concern are respected.

Goal 10: Strengthened support is provided to UNHCR programmes and activities worldwide.

- The countries in the region maintain or increase their annual contributions to UNHCR global programmes.
- The governments in the region remain ready to contribute to emergency appeals, if needed, at the same generous level as in previous years.
- Contributions from private funds (corporate partnerships and donors among the general public, foundations and community groups) continue to increase.
- Sustainability in private funds achieved.