

Country of Origin Information Unit - Standard Operating Procedures

1. Country of Origin Information Unit

1.1. Country of Origin Information Unit (COI Unit) is a structural unit in the Asylum Issues Division in the Department of Migration, Repatriation and Refugee Issues under the Ministry of Internally Displaced Persons from the Occupied Territories, Accommodation and Refugees of Georgia (MRA).

1.2. COI Unit consists of the country of origin information research specialists and the Head of the Unit who is the country of origin information research specialist as well.

1.3. COI Unit is to provide Refugee Status Determining (RSD) specialists and all other actors involved in international protection procedures with the information about asylum seekers' country of origin (or, in case of stateless people, countries of former habitual residence).

1.4. COI Unit operates according with Georgian Legislation, Regulation of the MRA and all other specific laws, by-laws and legal acts.

2. Country of Origin Information

2.1. Country of Origin Information (COI) is information which is used during the assessment of asylum claim. COI is not guidance for decision makers on assessment of an asylum claim; COI is information that helps decision-makers in assessment process.

2.2. According to the article 14, paragraph 3 of the Georgian Law on “Refugee and Humanitarian Status”, conclusion on granting or denying an asylum, prepared by the decision-maker along with other components is based on information on applicant's country of origin.

2.3. Country of Origin Information includes the information about the country of origin of the asylum-seeker (or, in case of stateless people, countries of former habitual residence).

2.4. Country of Origin Information deals with human rights questions, the security situation, the availability of the state protection, political, societal and legal situation, events and incidents as well as the humanitarian, economic, cultural and geographical conditions in a given country.

2.5. Country of Origin Information is an information which is available in written or oral form, as images, or in others forms, understandable or is translated in understandable language.

3. Objectives of COI

3.1. The objective of COI is to help RSD specialists in evaluation of human rights questions, the availability of state protection, security situation, the political, societal and legal situation, events and incidents as well as the humanitarian economic, cultural and geographical conditions in the country of origin of asylum seeker (or, in case of stateless people, countries of former habitual residence).

3.2. COI is used at different stages of international protection procedures by all actors involved. COI is to help decision makers in preparation for the interview with asylum-seeker. During and after the interview, COI serves to cross-check statements made by the applicant and to establish the credibility of the testimony.

3.3. COI can help to answer two types of questions: protection-related questions and questions related to credibility of the applicant:

3.3.1. Protection-related questions are closely connected to the substance of a claim for international protection. They deal with the applicant's fear of being persecuted for one or more of the five grounds mentioned in the 1951 Refugee Convention; or with violations of human rights, which form the basis for a claim to complementary protection. The purpose of asking protection-related questions is to receive information which helps assess the risk an applicant might face upon return to his or her country of origin.

3.3.2. To assess the applicant's credibility, his or her evidence has to be analyzed with regard to its sufficiency of detail and specificity, its internal and external consistency, its consistency with available COI, and the statement's overall plausibility. COI requested for the purposes of assessing the credibility of an asylum-seeker may relate to specific events, persons or situations featured in the applicant's statement.

3.4. The objective of the COI is to help RSD specialists make decision on granting or refusing the status to asylum-seeker.

4. Responsibilities

4.1 Responsibilities of RSD Specialists with Respect to COI

4.1.1. RSD specialists identify the core facts of the claim of asylum-seeker – what is the whole case about, which Convention grounds might be at stake, are there grounds for granting a humanitarian status according to the Georgian legislation.

4.1.2. RSD specialists identify the main issues of the case;

4.1.3. RSD specialists formulate research questions according to provided facts of the case and the form provided in section 5, with the indication of the timeframe, if relevant.

4.2 Responsibility of COI unit

4.2.1. The main task of the COI unit is researching Country of Origin Information. The Unit researches information on issues, raised in the questions provided by the decision-making specialist and prepares corresponding answers.

4.2.2. COI unit is responsible to update the RSD specialists about the developments in relevant countries and provide news updates.

4.2.3. COI unit collects relevant, objective and updated information on requested COI questions. COI unit shall present research results without adding the researcher’s opinions or drawing conclusions.

5. COI request form

5.1. RSD specialist addresses the COI specialist by e-mail in order to get Country of Origin Information.

5.2. COI request form:

COI Request	
Name of requester	
Date of submission of the request	
Deadline for the answer	

Main topics and key elements of the claim (If Necessary)
Research questions;

6. COI research and sharing of results

6.1. After overviewing the main topics and aspects of the case, COI specialist collects existing and available information about the issues raised in the questions.

6.2 COI specialist should ask for clarification of the questions on the COI request form, where he/she is not sure about what exactly is being requested;

6.3. COI specialist researches and collects information according to the quality standards. The obtained information is integrated into the COI Research Report.

6.4. COI specialist shares COI research report with the RSD Specialist by e-mail.

6.5. COI Research Report Form:

COI Research Report	
Name of Requester	Name of COI Research Specialist
Deadline for the answer	Date of preparation

Research Question	
Query Response	
Additional Comments	

7. COI Database

7.1. COI Database is an electronic database where all the Country of Origin Information obtained by COI specialists is collected.

7.2. COI specialists upload all query responses and all the relevant information on electronic database.

8. COI Research methodology

8.1. COI Unit creates the research strategy, according to which s/he conducts research. Using this strategy, COI specialist effectively manages time, defines needed sources for research, is focused on research question, easily identifies unnecessary information and detects the failure of research on time.

8.2. During the COI research specialist collect information by using electronic publications – specialized sources, specific databases on Country of Origin Information, global internet search systems, media archives, maps and e-books.

8.3. During the COI research COI specialists collect information from non-electronic sources – library departments for obtaining the Country of Origin Information, universities and other academic libraries.

8.4. During the COI research COI specialist obtain information from primary source and facts-finding missions - experts, academics, non-governmental organizations, International Organizations, government representations and journalists.

8.5. COI specialist checks the obtained information by cross-checking it with different available sources.

8.6. COI specialists, RSD specialists, all persons/authorities who work on asylum issues are obliged to follow principles of confidentiality and protection of personal data.

9. Quality Standards

9.1. COI used for deciding on international protection needs to be relevant, based on questions rooted in legal concepts of refugee and human rights law or on questions derived from an applicant's statements.

9.2. Decisions on international protection needs should be based on COI from reliable sources, taking into account the source's political and ideological context as well as its mandate, reporting methodology and motivation. As each source has its own perspective and focus, different sources and different types of sources should be consulted to achieve the most comprehensive and balanced picture possible.

9.3. Only information that is correct and valid at the time a decision is made should be used. Accuracy and currency can be achieved by cross-checking and corroborating information.

9.4. To ensure transparency, COI should be fully referenced to enable readers to independently verify and assess the information. Every piece of information should be traceable to its source. Information should be clearly presented and its meaning must not be distorted.

9.5. COI research should be conducted in a neutral manner with regard to the outcome. COI Specialists should be impartial.

9.6. Quality control of the information that is prepared by COI specialists is done by the head of COI unit.

10. Limits of COI

10.1. **COI is not risk assessment** - COI research shall comprise of the collection and selection of information, the assessment of sources. Risk assessment on the basis of the information presented by COI Unit is part of the use of COI. It is up to the RSD specialists to draw conclusions related to the individual claim and to make a prognostic assessment.

10.2. **Personal data of the applicant must be protected** - The applicant's personal data must be protected under all circumstances. Persons or institutions in the country of origin must not be contacted if there is a danger of harming the applicant or his or her affiliates.

10.3. **COI evidence is commonly inconclusive** - COI supports decision-makers in their assessment of claims for international protection. COI can help to foster understanding of the context of an applicant's claim; it may corroborate an applicant's statements; and it supports decision-makers in judging the applicant's risk of future persecution. However, COI seldom provides conclusive answers concerning a person's credibility or his or her need of international protection.

10.4. **COI is often too generic** - While information about the general human rights situation in a country of origin may be available, less information (or sometimes no information at all) will be available about people who find themselves in the specific circumstances of the applicant. When a lot of reports and articles on a general fact are available, it is, however, unlikely to find information about the concrete facts or specific person, unless this fact or person is well-known and therefore reported on. Even if information about individuals which are not publicly known is found, it often comes from sources with questionable reliability and cannot be corroborated.

10.5. **Sometimes COI is not available at all** - There are various reasons why at times no information can be found about a question or issue at stake. The more problematic the situation in a given country is, the more difficult it can be to obtain information about the precise circumstances in that country, due to restrictions placed on the media and independent human rights monitors. Limitations of access for international press or human rights missions are often aggravated by a lack of independence within the national media, self-censorship or restrictions on freedom of movement. The presence of international organizations, the communication

infrastructure of a specific country or a functioning and diverse civil society are also aspects that influence the availability of information.

10.6. Language constraints - In practice, one of the obstacles in accessing COI is language. The majority of documents commonly used as COI are published in English. A lot of information published in the languages of countries of origin, including reports in local and national media and information published by local and national institutions remains inaccessible to those who lack the respective language skills.

11. Timeframe for collecting of Country of Origin Information

11.1. The COI unit prepares an answer for the decision-making specialist's question in accordance with the time limit set by the decision-making specialist, defined in the form given in section 5.

11.2. Time limit for preparation of the answer must be set in reasonable manner, in accordance to the characteristics of the question and must be no less than 5 business days.

11.3. Time limit for preparation of an answer may be set less than 5 business days only upon joint decision of the immediate supervisor of the decision-making specialist and immediate supervisor of the COI specialist.

11.4. The country of origin information research specialist in coordination with the immediate supervisor registers failure of the research and informs decision-making specialist on that no later than 1 day before expiration of the time limit.