



UNHCR
The UN
Refugee Agency



REFUGEE SITUATION BULGARIA
EXTERNAL UPDATE
MARCH 6, 2014

HIGHLIGHTS

- Bulgaria is currently hosting close to 7,400 asylum-seekers and refugees.
- UNHCR remains concerned over measures to restrict access to Bulgaria, in particular along the Turkish border, which have resulted in a significant reduction of arrivals. UNHCR will also continue to advocate for unhindered access to the territory.
- Living conditions continue to improve in most reception centres, they remain below standards in two, out of seven, centres.
- There is significant progress in the registration of asylum-seekers in reception centres, though delays persist in the registration of asylum-seekers living outside centres (half of the caseload).
- Currently, there are no assessment and referral mechanisms for vulnerable persons, nor specific support for them. There are still no systems to adequately address the needs of unaccompanied children, despite ongoing discussions between all the concerned stakeholders.
- It is necessary to consolidate the progress achieved to date and to make it sustainable.
- UNHCR will continue to work closely with the Bulgarian Government, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO), the EU Commission, civil society, and other stakeholders to further improve reception conditions as well as access to services, and to fair and effective asylum procedures.

CURRENT SITUATION IN BULGARIA

According to the State Refugee Agency (SAR), as of 4 March 2014, Bulgaria was hosting 7,366 asylum-seekers, including 3,708 in seven accommodation centres and 3,658 living at their own expense at external addresses. Around 850 persons who have been recognized as refugees continue to remain in reception centres because they lack the means to live independently.

UNHCR remains concerned about the measures taken by the Bulgarian Government to restrict access to its territory. The number of arrivals has significantly decreased following the implementation of these measures. According to the Ministry of Interior, there have been 214 irregular crossings into Bulgaria in January and February 2014 and none in March (as of 6 March). The number of asylum-seekers reaching Bulgaria started rising in mid-2013. In September there were 3,626 new arrivals. In early November the Bulgarian authorities announced measures to reduced crossings at the border with Turkey. Since then, the number of arrivals declined to 290 in December 2013, 106 in January 2014 and 108 in February.

In January and February financial allowances were provided in one centre in Sofia only, which was a major challenge for asylum-seekers staying in Voenna Rampa and Vrazdebnna. SAR has assured that as of March they will be distributing financial assistance in each centre.

UNHCR ASSESSMENT AND RESPONSE

UNHCR welcomes the Bulgarian Government's commitment to address the challenges posed by the increased number of asylum-seekers and the steps it has taken to address them, with the support of

UNHCR, EASO, the EU Commission, Member States, and civil society. Significant progress has been made in a number of areas although important gaps persist. It is necessary to ensure that the progress achieved is consolidated and made sustainable.

Reception conditions in most centres have improved. New arrivals are registered promptly and all asylum-seekers receive food from SAR which has increased its staffing and overall capacity. As of 5 March, all asylum-seekers in Harmanli have been registered. However, there are still delays in the registration of asylum-seekers living outside reception centres who constitute over half of the caseload. SAR has indicated that they will start working to address this gap. UNHCR is monitoring the timely issuance of the registration cards (Green Card) for asylum-seekers which allow them to receive financial monthly assistance and give access to services such as healthcare. SAR has started the renovations of the two reception centres where the living conditions are still inadequate: Voenna Rampa and Vrazhdebna.

There has been progress in the 'pre-registration' of asylum-seekers transferred from border facilities and detention facilities to reception centres, who were issued with a white slip of paper carrying the holder's photograph. Furthermore, the number of first instance decisions in the asylum procedure has increased since SAR recruited new staff, as UNHCR continues to cooperate closely with SAR and EASO to address challenges related to the asylum procedure, including ensuring adequate interpretation.

In Kovachevtsi, the living, as well as hygiene and sanitation, conditions are good. Renovation work has started in Vrazhdebna and Voenna Rampa, where sanitation conditions remain a serious concern. In Voenna Rampa, after completion of the cleaning of the site, UNHCR will start the reconstruction of the kitchen site in the second week of March. UNHCR will also begin reconstruction work in the kitchen and dining area of Harmanli by the middle of March. Voenna Rampa, where over 90% of the asylum-seekers are from Syria, continues to be overcrowded, with 50-60 people accommodated in former classrooms having to use bed sheets to ensure privacy for their families.

The reception conditions continue to improve in Harmanli where the second phase of the rehabilitation process has begun. The authorities have lifted the closed regime allowing people to leave the centre during the day. However, the number of hours asylum-seekers are allowed to leave the centre has been reduced (currently from 2 pm to 6 pm) following an alleged incident between an asylum-seeker and locals. SAR started to supply cooked food in all centres on 1 February using donated items. Since 25 February, SAR procures and prepares the food that is distributed in all centres. UNHCR has signed an agreement with CARITAS to provide Bulgarian language courses for children and adult asylum-seekers in six centres (Voenna Rampa, Vrazhdebna, Kovachevtsi, Harmanli, Pastrogor and Banya) as of mid-March.

While the authorities have expressed their commitment to assist persons with specific needs, there are still no early identification, assessment and referral mechanisms in place for vulnerable asylum-seekers with specific needs, including unaccompanied children; nor specific support for them. Civil society is attempting to fill these gaps, but the intervention of the State is required. The psychosocial, educational and accommodation needs of unaccompanied children remain unaddressed. The lack of legal guardianship prevents them from obtaining ID documents.

On 27 February, the Commission on Human Rights and Citizens' Complaints held a hearing on draft amendments to the Law for Asylum and Refugees (LAR) proposed in January 2014 by members of Parliament from the ultranationalist party Ataka aimed at depriving beneficiaries of international protection and of temporary protection from the right to family reunification. UNHCR attended the hearing and advocated for the principle of family unity. The Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and SAR did not support the draft proposal. The Commission on Human Rights and Citizens' Complaints voted against the proposal and the text will not move to the plenary.