



REFUGEE SITUATION BULGARIA EXTERNAL UPDATE MARCH 21, 2014

HIGHLIGHTS

- Bulgaria is hosting 6,832 asylum-seekers as of 19 March.
- 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. Reports have been received of people being pushed back at the Turkey-Bulgarian border.
- Living conditions continue to improve in most reception centres and renovations are ongoing in the two centres, out of seven, where conditions remain below standards.
- SAR has confirmed that all people in their centres and at external addresses have been registered and have received their Registration Cards (also called “Green Cards”) as of 6 March.
- Currently, there are no assessment and referral mechanisms for vulnerable persons, nor specific support for them.
- 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 19 March 2014, Bulgaria was hosting 6,832 asylum-seekers, including 3,358 in seven accommodation centers and 3,474 living at their own expense at external addresses. Over 1,200 persons who have been recognized as refugees continue to remain in reception centres because they lack the means to live independently and currently there is no programme to support them outside the centres.

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, as of 20 March there have been 347 irregular crossings into Bulgaria since 1 January including 271 who entered through the green border and 75 entered who tried to enter through official border crossing points hidden in vehicles. The number of asylum-seekers reaching Bulgaria started rising in mid-2013. In October there were 3,626 new arrivals. In early November the Bulgarian authorities announced measures to reduced crossings at the border with Turkey. UNHCR has received information of two separate cases of asylum-seekers allegedly forcibly returned to Turkey. One of the cases was of a Syrian family allegedly forced back in December 2013. In another case, a young adult was allegedly pushed-back twice. UNHCR is looking into these allegations.

SAR has confirmed that all people in their centres and at external addresses have been registered and have received their Registration Cards (also called “Green Cards”) as of 6 March. SAR has also informed

that the only delays in registration are impacting new arrivals that have been transferred from detention centres. SAR assured UNHCR that registration cards are issued within three days of the registration of an asylum seeker. In RRC Banya, the registration cards are now issued within 24 hours. SAR has now 32 registration staff in 4 centres (RRC-Sofia in Ovcha Kupel, RRC-Banya, RRC-Harmanli and TC-Pastrogor); 42 staff and 47 interpreters have been appointed to conduct interviews for asylum procedures (in the same centres).

On 11 March the draft amendment of the Asylum and Refugee Law, as submitted to the Parliament by the Council of Ministers on 19 November 2013, was adopted during the first reading at the Plenary. During the first reading, the draft LAR was debated only in its entirety. Upon an official request by UNHCR, SAR confirmed that the National Programme for Integration of Refugees (NPIR) – 2014 is expected to be adopted by the Council of Ministers next week.

UNHCR ASSESSMENT AND RESPONSE

A total of 1,287 people are accommodated in the centre RRC-Harmanli the majority of them are Syrians, followed by Afghans and Malians. Almost 30 per cent are children, including 23 unaccompanied children. In addition there are approximately 700-800 registered asylum-seekers at external addresses, their asylum procedures will be taking place in the centre. There are some 2000 people registered in RRC-Harmanli waiting for the asylum procedure. There are no longer any restrictions to the freedom of movement for residents of RRC-Harmanli. Reconstruction work in



RRC-Harmanli is moving fast with a plan to accommodate approximately 2000 additional people by end of April. This will raise the overall reception capacity in Harmanli to around 6000 places. Two class rooms have been assigned for Bulgarian language courses and classes will begin shortly.

In TC Pastrogor there are currently 278 people, of whom approximately 150 have been granted status. They remain in the centre because they cannot afford to rent their own housing. In TC-Pastrogor hygiene and waste management in the centre are rather poor. In order to improve the overall hygiene in the facility, measures should be taken to address regular provision of sanitation and cleaning materials. UNHCR is in contact with the Bulgarian Red Cross Youth Department as they had committed to provide detergents and cleaning materials in all SAR centres in the coming weeks.

In RC-Voenna Rampa, as of 11 March there were approximately 716 residents. Reconstruction work is going well and there are improvements in sanitation following a meeting between UNHCR, the management of the centre and community leaders. New chemical toilets have been delivered to resolve sanitation issues arising from the temporary closure of facilities for reconstruction work. On 11 March, the Employment Agency, Ministry of Labour and Social Policy and SAR held a job fair together with Bulgarian Arab community companies in space provided by UNHCR in RC Voenna Rampa. The fair was well attended and flyers with information on labour rights in Arabic were distributed.

As of this week, UNHCR's implementing partner, Caritas Sofia, has started Bulgarian language classes for children and adults in TRC Pastrogor, RRC Banya and RRC Vrazdebnha. Languages classes will begin in RRC Voenna Rampa, RRC Kovachevtsi and RRC Harmanli next week. UNICEF "school in a box" equipment is being used for these classes. In all reception centres, the daily presence of staff of UNHCR's implementing partners, BRC and the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, as well as regular weekly monitoring missions by



UNHCR staff ensures that asylum-seekers and recognized refugees residing in the centres have easy access to information on services, their rights and responsibilities as well as to legal counseling and judicial support.

There were delays in the distribution of monthly allowances for asylum-seekers for February and March due to the late transfer of funds from the State Budget to the SAR. SAR has assured UNHCR that beneficiaries will receive their allowances in all the centres by 21 March 2014. UNHCR will continue to monitor and follow up. MSF is gradually preparing to

phase out in RRC Harmanli, RRC Voenna Rampa and RRC Vrazdebhna by end May and is working in cooperation with SAR to designate general practitioners.

UNHCR has opened an Information Centre in Sofia on 17 March with the support of its implementing partner BRC. Asylum-seekers and refugees living in the urban areas can now seek advice, receive legal and social counseling and get adequate information about their rights, obligations and access to different services in one single location.

SAR has announced that it has arranged with the Agency for Social Assistance for unaccompanied children who have refugee status to be accommodated in the local Children's Medical and Social Care Homes, where they will receive proper care and assistance. UNHCR will monitor the implementation of this arrangement.

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