



**REFUGEE SITUATION BULGARIA
EXTERNAL UPDATE
FEBRUARY 21, 2014**

HIGHLIGHTS

- Bulgaria is currently hosting over 7,600 asylum-seekers and refugees.
- UNHCR remains concerned over measures to restrict access to Bulgaria, in particular along the Turkish borders
- The Bulgarian authorities are distributing two hot meals a day in all reception centres. The food supply still depends on donations and charitable organizations.
- While living conditions continue to improve, they remain inadequate in most centres.
- Delays remain in the distribution of registration cards – which provide access to rights and financial assistance.
- UNHCR is concerned that there are still no solutions to adequately address the needs of, and safely accommodate, unaccompanied minors.
- 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, access to services and to ensure that asylum-seekers have access to the territory and to fair and effective asylum procedures.

CURRENT SITUATION IN BULGARIA

According to the State Refugee Agency (SAR), as of 19 February in 2014 Bulgaria was hosting 7,469 asylum-seekers, including 3,863 in seven accommodation centres and 3,765 living at their own expense at external addresses. Some refugees who have been granted status continue to remain in reception centres as 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 continues to be low. According to the Ministry of Interior there have been 132 irregular crossings into Bulgaria (99 at the Bulgarian-Turkish border) in January 2014 and 113 arrived during the first twenty days of February.

There is progress in the initial registration of asylum-seekers in all centres, although a main challenge remains the slow issuance of registration cards. Many asylum-seekers that arrived in Bulgaria 3 or 4 months ago are still waiting for registration cards, which entitle them to monthly financial assistance and access to health services. For example, in Harmanli approximately 300 to 400 registration cards have already been distributed, while 700 to 800 asylum-seekers were waiting for their cards to be issued. In addition, the delays in the asylum procedure continue, even though the number of decisions has increased and SAR has increased staffing. UNHCR is working with EASO and the authorities to address these challenges and to improve the quality of the procedure.

The delay in payments of the monthly allowance of 65 BGN (€33) is gradually being resolved, though there are some challenges in relation to having only one distribution point in Sofia. Currently, the allowance is only distributed in the Ovcha Kupel reception centre. UNHCR has requested SAR to make arrangements to distribute the allowance in the other centres in Sofia and to give priority to already identified asylum-

seekers with specific needs for whom waiting in long lines to receive their allowance it's very difficult. SAR is working to address this, and has indicated that the distribution of monthly assistance in the other centres could begin in March.

UNHCR ASSESSMENT AND RESPONSE

SAR is organizing the food delivery in all centres since the beginning of February, except in the Kovatchestki centre where food distribution began on 13 February. Currently, the food supply depends solely on donations and charitable organizations. SAR's 2014 budget has been approved by the Council of Ministers and 4,475,000 BGN (€2,288,040) was allocated for food provision. SAR is now working to identify food suppliers.



Living conditions continue to improve in some centres, but reception conditions remain inadequate in most centres. Lack of privacy and effective assessment mechanisms to identify persons with special needs are concerning. Reception conditions in Harmanli continue to improve, and reconstruction plans are underway in this and other centres. Voenna Rampa continues to be overcrowded, with an optimal capacity of 450 people and currently accommodating 816 people. Up to 50-60 people are being accommodated in several former classrooms where they must use blankets to create individual spaces for ensuring privacy. More than 90% of the asylum-seekers in this centre are Syrians. Another major concern is the sanitation in the facility as it remains deplorable and needs to be urgently addressed. Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) announced that their mission in Bulgaria will end at the end of March. At this stage, the authorities will need to have a plan in place to take over the provision of medical care in all centres.

UNHCR is concerned that there are still no solutions to adequately address the needs of and safely accommodate unaccompanied minors. UNHCR is working with partners to provide the authorities with selection criteria for the most appropriate place to accommodate them. It is critical to identify suitable accommodation attuned to their specific needs. UNHCR will continue to work with SAR and partners on finding the best possible solutions for unaccompanied minors, as this needs to be urgently addressed.

On a positive note, with increased staff the Council for Refugee Women (CRW) is intensifying its "home visits" among asylum-seekers and refugees in urban areas, providing them with relevant information on procedures, rights and obligations. If additional needs are identified women asylum-seekers and refugees will be referred to other partners.

In order to develop a mass information strategy, a multi-functional task force, composed of representatives from SAR, UNHCR, UNICEF, International Organization for Migration (IOM), MSF, and the Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC), visited six reception centres and one detention facility to map information needs of asylum-seekers. There are serious gaps in terms of available information and the task force observed that the only information materials available at all centres are IOM's Assisted Voluntary Return brochures and posters in Arabic and Farsi. Additional information found in two centres was not always in the most appropriate language. The most needed information relates to refugee status determination, associated rights to receiving a registration card, access to health services in Bulgaria, and access to education and schooling opportunities for children.