Participatory Assessment 2010 Report

Being a refugee

How refugees and asylum-seekers experience life in Central Europe

AGE
GENDER
DIVERSITY
MAINSTREAMING

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Regional Representation for Central Europe

Participatory Assessment 2010 Report

Being a refugee

How refugees and asylum-seekers experience life in Central Europe

UNHCR
The UN
Refugee Agency

Published by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Regional Representation for Central Europe

Budapest, 2011

The photos in this publication serve as illustrations and do not necessarily depict the people mentioned in the report. All pictures have been taken in Central Europe in recent years. Photographers are credited with their pictures.

All names of asylum-seekers, refugees and other persons of concern have been changed for protection reasons.

Table of contents

Foreword

This report of the UNHCR Regional Representation for Central Europe's annual Participatory Assessment gives a summary of the situation for asylum-seekers, refugees and people with subsidiary protection in the region, as they reported it to UNHCR and other members of the research teams in 2010.

Participatory Assessments are part of UNHCR's commitment to Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) and aim to include the voices and experiences of women, men, boys and girls of different ages and ethnic backgrounds into its planning and advocacy efforts. The process is about identifying needs, gaps and sharing good practices.

Multi-functional teams comprising representatives from governments, non-government organisations (NGOs) and UNHCR visited dozens of locations across seven countries in Central Europe. They carried out focus group discussions, individual interviews, and observed the situation and condition for asylum-seekers and refugees in various locations. In some countries, questionnaires were also completed by refugees.

Each team developed a national report including a list of recommendations on key areas to be addressed. Since the process began in Central Europe in 2005, many problems reported by refugees and asylum-seekers have been addressed through concerted efforts of governments and NGOs who have acted on the recommendations of previous years' reports.

Each country chapter includes a summary of key improvements made – testament to the commitment of governments to improve the way they fulfil their obligations to provide international protection to people fleeing violence and persecution, and to the efficacy of the participatory assessment process we have built up over the years.

In 2010, we saw better information for asylum-seekers and refugees on the asylum procedures and how to access medical and other services in some countries. The internet is now available in more reception centres, and there are more activities and playgrounds for children. We also saw some governments and NGOs proactively taking steps to build understanding among local host communities about the new people in their midst by organising cultural events or providing information on the opening of new reception centres. People with subsidiary protection in some countries can now access integration programmes or accommodation centres previously reserved for refugees.

Still, as the voices of refugees and asylum-seekers in this report show serious concerns remain. Access to housing and jobs remain key concerns in all countries in the region, and, in some places, refugees and people with subsidiary protection face serious risks of homelessness – even for those who have been living in Central Europe for several years. Across the board, there needs to be more systematic and coordinated programmes to support integration, involving different facets and coalitions of government, civil society including religious groups, businesses, and community organizations.

More and more asylum-seekers are being detained, whether through tougher policies at national levels or through the inadequacy of open accommodation facilities through which asylum-seekers are sent to detention facilities. At the same time, asylum-seekers and refugees struggle to make themselves understood in all aspects of their lives with the limited interpretation services available.

People granted subsidiary protection still face longer periods of uncertainty on shorter visas and can access fewer services, even when from countries with protracted conflict. Meanwhile, statistics show a growing trend to grant subsidiary protection over refugee status in the region – making the imperative to improve conditions for this growing number of people in the region even more urgent.

Gottfried Koefner
Regional Representation for Central Europe
Budapest, November 2011

© UNHCR/ B. Szandelszky

Bulgaria

While the economic crisis hit Bulgaria hard in 2010, some refugees did find work with national and international companies as employers had an increased awareness about their rights. Another positive sign is that today refugees and others with international protection know more about their right to health care than in the past. But, the good news ends there. The research team for this report found that many more improvements are needed to make the integration of refugees a success story. Government support to find housing and learn Bulgarian is not enough; single mothers and the elderly face the most difficulty overcoming these hurdles. Even vaccinations for their children can be out of reach for many refugees.

Located in south-eastern Europe at an external EU border, the fight against irregular migration is high on the government agenda in Bulgaria. Yet, the country's border guards are exemplary in allowing people seeking asylum into the country. At the border, information in several languages is readily available. But, there the model character stops. The State Agency for Refugees (SAR) often delays registering people's asylum applications and many asylum-seekers end up in detention due to limited accommodation for them in open centres. Interpretation services which should help bridge the linguistic gap between asylum-seekers and detention personnel, border guards or government officials were very poor in quality or missing altogether. Living conditions such as hygiene, food for babies, pregnant women and those with health problems were below international and EU standards.

Methodology

The Age-Gender-Diversity-Mainstreaming (AGDM) approach behind this report aims to give a diverse range of asylum-seekers, refugees and others with some kind of protection status a voice by documenting their experience and perspective on life in Bulgaria. A Multi-Functional Team (MFT) was formed to meet these people in different locations comprising representatives from the UNHCR Representation in Bulgaria, the State Agency for Refugees (SAR) and different non-governmental organizations working for refugees including the national Red Cross, the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee, the Council of Refugee Women and the Association for Integration of Refugees and Migrants.

In 2010, the MFT interviewed asylum-seekers and protection status holders between May and September 2010. Interviews were held at the reception centres in Banya (eastern Bulgaria) and in Sofia, in the accommodation centre for foreigners in Busmantsi, as well as in the cities of Sofia and Sliven where refugees are living.

The asylum-seekers interviewed came originally from Afghanistan, Algeria, Iraq, Iran, Lebanon, Morocco, Sudan, Cameroon, Yemen and Syria. The recognized refugees and those with humanitarian status originated from Afghanistan, Albania, Iraq, Tanzania, Palestine and Ethiopia. Stateless asylum-seekers and refugees were also interviewed for this study.

In most cases, group interviews were conducted with three to ten people according to different sub-groups of legal status, age and gender. Individual interviews were also held mainly with children of asylum-seekers in detention. The MFT used three types of questionnaires to structure discussions.

Out of 170 people interviewed, there were 28 asylum-seeking and refugee children accompanied by their families and two unaccompanied minors. Of the 52 adults with protection status consulted for this report, 25 were women. Seventy-four of the 88 asylum-seekers interviewed were men. Seven people who took part in the study were older than 55 years.

© UNHCR/I. Grigorov

No place like home

Once recognized, refugees still have a long way to go before becoming part of Bulgarian society and the research team found many challenges in the integration process. The SAR organizes a National Programme for Integration of Refugees, already a step ahead of many European countries. But the support provided does not always match the needs of people trying to build a new life in Bulgaria. The SAR is aware of the need for improvement and has engaged with several NGOs like the Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria to design better integration measures. In 2010, the Council became a member of the Integration Commission.

Further improvements are still needed. The housing allowance should play an important role helping refugees who cannot afford a flat find a decent place to stay and enjoy a sense of stability, especially in their first few years in the country. Refugees consulted for this report said that the allowance, once finally received, is too low to cover rent and utilities in the prevailing market conditions. Certain groups interviewed separately such as single women and people with large families reported the gap between the housing allowance and the rental market was even wider. Estabraq Moaddel, a single mother from Iraq in her thirties, described her situation to UNHCR. Having lived

in Bulgaria for more than two years with her little daughter, she could hardly learn Bulgarian let alone find a job to sustain her living. Ms. Moaddel has to live with several single men between 20 and 30 years old in a flat. This is culturally inappropriate for her and makes her potentially vulnerable to abuse. The males pay the rent and buy the food; the woman has to cook and clean the house in exchange. Her enrolment in the National Integration Programme has not given her a sense of stability. “I would like to marry a man in order to protect me,” she said.

Finding work is hard work

Finding decent employment is no easier than the search for a place to live outside the reception centre. According to the testimonies collected, the only jobs refugees found were either part-time or temporary and without legal contracts and social and health insurance. A considerable number of refugees reported that they lost their jobs as a result of the economic crisis in 2010. From their perspective, the mainstream employment services by the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy did not address their specific situations. They were not offered any appropriate jobs or vocational training to facilitate employment, they told UNHCR. Refugees also had a hard time documenting qualifications acquired in their countries of origin as the employment services lack mechanisms to certify foreign diplomas. Some refugees undertake seasonal migration to other EU countries to find work.

On the more positive side, local and international employers in Bulgaria are better informed now about the right of refugees to work than a couple of years ago. Refugees found that companies were more willing to employ them.

Refugees still face challenges accessing health care, though there are some improvements. Some general practitioners became known for not treating refugees, if they were not accompanied by an interpreter knowing that they were available. Other doctors were not aware of the rights of refugees in the Bulgarian health care system to access free care. On the other hand, refugees and others with some form of international protection often had no clue about the free health care system. There are strong signs that more refugees now are proactively seeking assistance on health care issues than in recent years.

© UNHCR/ B. Szandelszky

Tell me who your friends are, and I'll tell you how integrated you are

Group discussions with refugee women brought gender-specific challenges for integration to light. While men found the methodology applied in Bulgarian language classes not very helpful, women with small children could not even attend the courses run by SAR under the National Integration Programme for lack of childcare arrangements. As Estabraq Moaddel´s case shows, taking care of her little daughter made it difficult to acquire the language skills to become independent from the handful of single young men paying for her food and accommodation. Refugee women also voiced concern about the lack of social contacts, an indication that their integration process had not advanced far.

Integration is no easier for elderly refugees. Men and women over 55 years old find it even more difficult to have a social life; they feel isolated and insecure. More often than other groups, the elderly reported that they did not fully enjoy their rights, ranging from health care to housing and employment. For most of them, families and other relatives are the main providers of food and other basic supplies. For those without support networks in their own communities, the picture looks grim.

At the other end of the age spectrum, asylum-seekers 17 years and under are finally enrolled in school and the language courses provided at the reception centres appear to be paying off. Unfortunately, some children drop out of school for various reasons – whether demoralized as they were put in a lower grade which did not correspond to their age or because their families need them to help earn a living or look after younger siblings. Lack of specialized support for these children also appears to play a role. Some children complained they could not follow the curriculum. The research team also found that important health services like vaccinations are not available to all children.


© UNHCR/I. Grigorov

No cold milk today, no hot shower tomorrow

In general, reception centres for asylum-seekers in Bulgaria are not yet up to the standard set by the European Union. Washing machines are not available or do not work properly in all facilities, and asylum-seekers cannot regularly wash their clothes. "There is no fridge," Yaghoub Tehrani, an asylum-seeker from Iran said with anger about conditions in a reception centre. "So I have to go to the market every day, but I can´t pay for the bus ticket." Female asylum-seekers told research teams that there was no baby food.

Hygienic conditions in reception centres were found to be substandard and appear to be getting worse. Since the participatory assessment was carried out in late 2010, UNHCR has learned that hot showers are now only available during office hours. The arrangements for washing outside these limited hours are unclear.

> *"There is no fridge. So I have to go to the market every day, but I can´t pay for the bus ticket."*

© UNHCR/I. Grigorov

Behind bars for claiming asylum

Those with a place in reception centres are still better off than other asylum-seekers who are detained for long periods of time. Sometimes, this is due to insufficient coordination between different authorities and often due to delays in the registration of asylum claims. Sometimes the SAR did not manage to provide the places needed in an open reception centre so many asylum-seekers were transferred to the Special Centre for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners in Busmantsi near Sofia Airport. “I was in Busmantsi for more than one month. For me, it was a prison,” said Kathem Al-Rassam, an asylum-seeker from Iraq.

Since the interviews carried out for this report, the length of time asylum-seekers in this EU country spend in detention appears to have grown considerably with some people spending up to several months in detention.

The Busmantsi detention centre is also infamous for the lack of interpretation services provided by authorities. Those sharing their very personal and often harrowing stories of flight have to contend with very rough summaries transmitted in their communication with authorities. The lack of professional interpreters is reported to be a problem at the border, at the detention centre of the Migration Directorate and also in the courts. “When they asked me to sign the translation, there were things I hadn´t said,” Mehrdad Mozafar, an asylum-seeker from Iran reported. “So I did not sign it.”

Improvements for asylum-seekers

The MFT has been following issues of concern to asylum-seekers through participatory assessment for several years now. Thanks to constant follow-up, very tangible aspects of everyday life in Bulgaria have improved for asylum-seekers. Here are some of the improvements in 2010.

- If you knock at Bulgaria´s border to seek asylum, you can get more and better information about the procedures and about refugee protection than in the past. Information is available in Bulgarian, Arabic, Dari, English, French, Kurdish, Pasthu, Somali and Turkish.

- The time Bulgaria detained asylum-seekers was shortened in 2010 because the SAR was regularly transferring asylum-seekers from detention to open reception centres. This applied particularly to the Special Centre for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners in Busmantsi where the duration of detention of families with children and mothers has been reduced considerably. (Since the assessment was carried out, this trend has been reversed in border areas where, according to reports, border police have increased the detention of asylum-seekers entering the country irregularly. This has caused, in some instances, worrying delays in registering the protection claims by SAR.)

Improvements for refugees

The MFT found the following positive developments for refugees in 2010:

- Refugees in general have become more aware of their rights, particularly those related to health care, and are more proactively seeking assistance.
- Employers are better informed about refugees´ right to work and are more willing to hire them.
- Refugees are more often given the opportunity to work in local or international companies like supermarket chains whereas in the past they had to rely on the limited number and scope of jobs offered by other foreigners or within their ethnic community.
- The SAR reached out to refugee community organizations (like the Council of Refugee Women in Bulgaria) to improve integration support. Both organizations are now jointly organizing cultural events, providing consultations to asylum-seekers and keeping track of vulnerable people's participation in the integration programme.

Employers are better informed about the refugees´ right to work and are more willing to hire them.

Recommendations

- Prevent the detention of asylum-seekers in the Special Centre for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners in Busmantsi by quick transfer to the reception centres of the SAR.
- Ensure unhindered access of people seeking international protection at the border by ensuring there is information available which asylum-seekers can understand and quality interpretation both at the border and at the Special Centre for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners in Busmantsi.
- Avoid delays in the registration of protection claims by the SAR through legislative changes and speedy transfer to SAR´s Reception Registration Centres.
- Provide better, more comprehensive and understandable information to asylum-seekers in detention so that they can understand the procedures and know all their rights.
- Improve the quality of the asylum procedure through interpretation by people who fully comprehend their impartial role as literal facilitators of communication.
- Provide timely legal aid so that asylum-seekers understand their situation and enjoy all the rights according to national law.
- Renovate the rooms and the common areas in receptions centres. Functioning washing machines/laundries, refrigerators and cooking facilities should become standard.

- Make sure basic hygienic conditions – hot water, pest control and general cleanliness - are met and sustained in the reception centres.
- Develop alternative accommodation schemes for asylum-seekers outside the reception centres to better match with individual needs.
- Speed up the opening of the Transit Centre in Pastrogor (close to the Turkish border) to prevent homelessness and excessive detention period of asylum-seekers.
- Increase the financial assistance (currently the equivalent of 32 Euro per month) provided to asylum-seekers and refugees so that their most basic needs can be met. Provide supplementary food packages as part of the National Integration Programme.
- The National Health Insurance Fund and SAR should coordinate with each other in a more systematic way to ensure all asylum-seekers and refugees have timely access to health care.
- People with special medical conditions should be provided with the medicines they need, be it during the asylum-procedure or within a reasonable time after refugee status recognition.
- The National Health Insurance Fund and SAR should inform asylum-seekers and refugees about the access to health care through simple information material. Health service providers should train their personnel on the rights of these patients.
- Establish baseline data on the profile of recognized refugees in the country to better design integration measures. The situation of people with refugee or humanitarian status should be analyzed with regard to housing, education, language skills, jobs, health care and social welfare.
- Put targeted integration activities at the disposal of recognized refugees regardless of their age, social or health situation. Organize adequate integration services for vulnerable refugees.
- Ensure that the National Programme for the Integration of Refugees is also available in places outside Sofia where refugees reside.
- Improve the quality and flexible availability of Bulgarian language training, including for asylum-seekers or refugees with family obligations.
- In a timely manner, appoint guardians for unaccompanied minors seeking protection.
- Ensure all refugee children receive Bulgarian language training and attend school, counsel parents to prevent children dropping out of school, and improve interaction with local school children.
- Ensure that specific health, leisure or educational needs of individual refugee children are addressed.
- Involve refugees, including those organized in communities, in the management of reception centres to enhance their participation.
- Combat racism and xenophobia through national dialogue and targeted information campaigns promoting positive attitudes towards people in need of international protection.

Statistics

There was a 20 per cent rise in the number of asylum applications in Bulgaria in 2010, with 1,025 people submitting claims for international protection compared to only 853 applications in 2009, and 746 submitted in 2008. This trend has since been reversed in 2011. The main countries of origin of the asylum-seekers in 2010 were Iraq and Armenia, and there was a higher number of stateless people claiming protection.

On the other hand, the number of people recognised as refugees or given subsidiary protection in 2010 decreased. Only 20 people were recognized as refugees in 2010, compared to 39 recognised in 2009. The number of people granted complementary protection dropped by 48 per cent from 228 in 2009 to 118 people in 2010.

© UNHCR/ L. Taylor

Czech Republic

Finding work and a decent place to live are major concerns for many asylum-seekers and people with international protection in the Czech Republic. Despite the shortcomings of the residential centres for refugees which offer only limited services, 2010 saw welcome legislative changes opening up this accommodation to vulnerable people granted subsidiary protection thereby providing them a short buffer before they must find a home on the private market. Meanwhile, separated children live in a remote area of Bohemia too isolated from local communities to forge links that would help with integration.

Learning the local language is critical to help refugees find a home, a job and otherwise navigate their way in a new country. While there were welcome steps taken in 2010 to improve language training for refugees, slow government processes have meant the results are yet to be seen on the ground. Indeed, no Czech language classes were provided to refugees living outside of Integration Asylum Facilities in 2010 due to government delays appointing providers, leaving the Czech Republic far short of its national legislation and international obligations in this regard.

Across the board, asylum-seekers, refugees and people with subsidiary protection felt the shortage of interpretation services – whether trying to make themselves understood in accommodation centres, navigating the asylum procedure, or accessing medical care.

Methodology

The participatory assessment was carried out in October and November 2010. The Multi-Functional Teams (MFTs) included 15 people representing the Interior Minister's Department of Asylum and Migration Policy (DAMP), the Refugee Facilities Administration of the Ministry of Interior (RFA), the Organization for Aid to Refugees (OPU), the Association of Citizens Assisting Migrants (SOZE), the Association for Legal Issues of Migration (ASIM) and the UNHCR's Czech office and the Regional Representation for Central Europe in Budapest. The teams focused on reception conditions for asylum-seekers, the asylum procedure, and the integration assistance provided to refugees and those with subsidiary protection.

The methodology included semi-structured individual interviews, focus group meetings in different compositions, and observation by MFT members. The teams visited the following locations:

- Reception centres at Prague International Airport and Zastávka in South Moravia;
- Accommodation centre in Havířov and Kostelec in eastern Bohemia;
- Integration facilities in Brno (South Moravia) and Česká Lípa (northern Bohemia);
- Private accommodations in Brno;
- SOZE premises in Brno;
- Facility for separated children in Prague and Hříměždice (South Bohemia); and
- Detention facility in Bělá Jezová (northern Bohemia) and Poštorná (South Moravia).

The MFTs met with 68 individuals including asylum-seekers, refugees and people granted subsidiary protection. They came from Belarus, Cameroon, Cuba, the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Iran, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Kosovo, Mongolia, Nigeria, Palestine, the Russian Federation, Somalia, Syria, Turkey, Uzbekistan and Yemen.

Asylum procedure seen as lengthy and unclear

Many asylum-seekers reported they could not understand why the first instance decision on their asylum claims (which can take two or three years) took so long. They said they were not informed of the reasons for the delay, given only vague and general information if any, and did often not understand why they had to undertake repeat interviews. "I am always asked the same questions again and again, although I have nothing new to add," said Kyran, a young asylum applicant from Kazakhstan.

Despite improvements over the years, some asylum-seekers said they continued to have difficulties with interpreters which some described as impatient and aggressive and were not aware they could complain. "The interpreter was rude to me during my interview, and kept interrupting me, obviously showing his disbelief in what I was saying," said Serhan, an asylum-seeker from Syria at one of the detention centres. Another asylum-seeker said the report from his interview was not translated for him before he was requested to

> *"I am always asked the same questions again and again, although I have nothing new to add..."*

© UNHCR/ B. Szandelszky

sign it. Similar concerns were reported about the quality of interpretation and conduct of the Aliens Police staff at the international airport.

Asylum-seekers also said their access to legal aid was insufficient. NGO lawyers do not visit all centres where asylum-seekers stay and the quality of advice varies. While legal aid staff tend to speak common languages like English, French and some Russian, NGOs mostly don't have the funds to pay interpreters. This means many asylum-seekers from other language groups (like Chinese, Arabic, and non-Russian speakers from former Soviet Union) feel they don't have a chance to communicate properly with their lawyers.

The long wait in limbo takes its toll

The long period of uncertainty for asylum-seekers is compounded by difficulties finding work. Even though allowed to work after a year into the procedure, the short duration of asylum-seekers' visas, renewed monthly, makes employers reluctant to take them on. "It is practically nearly impossible to find a legal employment because our visa is provided and extended only for just one month," said Sulambek, young man from Chechnya, living at an accommodation centre. "No employer would ever undergo all the necessary bureaucracy unless he is sure I will indeed stay for at least a few months," he said.

While there has been an increase in leisure activities for asylum-seekers, they are not yet standard and there are few opportunities to learn or develop new skills. One young Kazakh man who had been staying in an accommodation centre for nearly a year told the MFT: "you waste six months of your life doing nothing meaningful at all. You don't learn anything new, you do not develop any skills, you just sit and wait, doing nothing, nothing at all." Elsewhere, inflexible rules impeded access to facilities. In the Moravia detention centre which has a good fitness centre, residents were frustrated by the rules which required people to sign up in advance and limit use to only 10 people per day. "If someone drops out of the list for some reason, there is no possibility to replace him," Kuandyk said.

> *"You waste six months of your life doing nothing meaningful at all.*
>
> *You don't learn anything new, you do not develop any skills, you just sit and wait, doing nothing, nothing at all."*

A bit of sensitivity would go a long way

The MFT heard that some guards working for a private security company were rude and arrogant to asylum-seekers and recommends that all personnel interacting with such people receive basic training on international protection needs as a prerequisite to employment. Applicants residing in a detention centre told the MFT they were routinely banned from using mobile phones and underwent security checks in their rooms, which they found to be degrading. While all detained people long for the day they are released, many fear how they will manage to meet their basic needs on the outside. “You cannot wait to get out of here. But then if you are placed here in the summer and released in the winter, you don’t have any clothes to wear,” said Lilia from the Russian Federation who has spent several months in the detention center. NGOs confirmed difficulties with several practical issues, citing a case of a mother and child released from a detention centre in the afternoon with no public transport available nearby for the rest of the day.

Health care still out of reach for many asylum-seekers and refugees

Many asylum-seekers, refugees and people with subsidiary protection reported serious problems with access to medical care even though they are enrolled in the universal health care system in the Czech Republic. While a local NGO received EU funds to cover medical fees for those most in need, it was not enough to cover the entire year in 2010 or for all people applying for it. One refugee with diabetes said she could not afford to pay for her insulin. Another asylum-seeker said he could not afford to pay for the public transport to visit a specialist in another town. “I don’t even go to doctor any more. If he prescribes me some medicine, I have no means to pay for it, not even for the fee of the prescription,” said Songu from Turkey, a mother of two interviewed at one of the accommodation centres.

Across the board, people said the lack of interpreters limited their access to medical care as they could not explain in detail their problems to doctors, nor understand treatment suggestions.

Vulnerable asylum-seekers face inadequate conditions

In 2010, the accommodation centre for asylum-seekers in Havířov (North Moravia) was closed and people were relocated to another centre in Zastávka, in South Moravia. “We only learned bits and pieces from other asylum-seekers while the official information on the closure came at the very last moment,” said Marjam, a young woman from the Russian Federation. “At the same time, we received only limited information on the centre where we were supposed to move in a few days time,” she added. One young girl forced to relocate was in her last year of secondary school and found the move disruptive to her studies. Others who had forged links around the original place of residence were also required to leave at short notice.

> *“We only learned bits and pieces from other asylum-seekers while the official information on the closure came at the very last moment.”*

The asylum-seekers were also concerned about the inferior standards at their new home, and with the lack of privacy for family groups. “I had no idea my daughter and I would no longer have a room by our own so I was completely unprepared to see another lady laying in bed once we walked into what we expected to be our new flat,” said Aminat, another woman from the Russian Federation. “What was even worse though was that her drunken boyfriend was sitting next to her bed, refusing to leave the room,” she added.

The MFT heard similar experiences of poor privacy and safety arrangements (even for vulnerable people) and poor communication by centre management. Another woman at the same facility told the MFT that the administrator wanted to move a newly arriving asylum-seeker into her room at 2 a.m. “As my son has a severe mental handicap, I really feared this would completely put him out of place for the rest of the night or even longer. He needs time to adjust to every subtle change of his daily routines and even the mere fact that later on, we had to share our room with another asylum-seeker was difficult for him to cope with,” said Anita. The same woman, afraid her son could fall out of the window, asked to move to a ground floor room but was told all rooms were occupied and it was impossible.

© UNHCR/ B. Szandelszky

Refugees face chronic housing difficulties

Newly recognized refugees can opt to stay in an Integration Asylum Facility for up to 18 months before they find private accommodation. But while the concept of such a facility is to support refugees on a path to integration, there are few services, little social and no legal counselling provided. Moreover, the costs for such accommodation are rather steep while the subsidized private accommodation guaranteed by national legislation is not available.

The MFT found that the fees refugees pay in these integration facilities are often higher than in private accommodation. Until recently, housing contracts were only provided in Czech, and refugees were required to sign them before they qualify for language training. Many refugees told the MFTs they did not understand the contracts

they had signed, and most could not understand the system for charging electricity, gas and water consumption. According to an independent study carried out by the Association for Legal Issues of Migration in 2010 refugees staying in an Integration Facility spend on average 75 per cent of their overall income on housing despite the fact that some of the money is provided for other purposes like child benefits.

The situation was even worse for people granted subsidiary protection who were not able to stay in the Integration Asylum Facility before recent changes to the Asylum Act. Upon receiving their status, these people were required to move out of residences for asylum-seekers and find a place to stay in the private market – leaving them vulnerable to exploitation on the irregular labour market as they scrambled to find a job quickly. The pressure to earn a living also prevents many people with this status undertaking the Czech language training to which they are entitled. “Someone told me I could take the classes and I would be interested but cannot possibly imagine how they would squeeze into my everyday life. I take care of three children and work like crazy to pay the rent, having no time at all for anything else,” said Mariman, an Iraqi mother living in a one-bedroom flat which costs most of her earnings. “I worry every day that I won’t get paid or will lose my job, which would be a total disaster,” she added.

The MFT also met with a group of children staying in a special facility in central Bohemia, including asylum-seekers and children with subsidiary protection. The centre, a former resort, is located in the middle of a forest and according to both the children and the staff offers very little integration potential. Most of the children attend a school in the facility and don’t mix with locals. Even those who go on to secondary school in the nearest town are constrained by the pressure to make the last public bus home around 4 p.m. “I understand this is not easy but we have nothing to do here. No extra activities, nothing to learn. You can watch TV or read books but that’s about it,” explained Paul who recently turned 18. “I have no Czech friends because since I am here, I have not met any,” he said.

> *“Someone told me I could take the classes and I would be interested but cannot possibly imagine how they would squeeze into my everyday life. I take care of three children and work like crazy to pay the rent, having no time at all for anything else.”*

Refugees miss out on Czech language training

Contrary to national legislation, there was no language training for refugees staying in private accommodation in 2010. According to the Asylum Act, everyone granted international protection in the Czech Republic is entitled to free language training (between 400 and 600 hours). But the Ministry of Education did not administer a tender for a training provider quickly enough. As a result, no language classes were on offer in 2010 either for people newly granted international protection that year or for those who started language training in 2009 but whose classes were disrupted at the end of the year. (In 2011, steps have been taken to improve the situation for language training.)

Even in the accommodation centres, classes did not always meet the needs of refugees. One young woman from Somalia told the MFT that when she arrived at the centre four months previously only an intermediate class was available. “They explained to me that there was nothing available for the beginners like myself,” Joseline said. Other refugees told the MFT they did not have any textbooks or received them several months into the training. In many cases, the MFT observed, the language classes took place in the refugees’ apartments without necessary equipment. While the refugees did not complain of this, the MFT felt the arrangements were inappropriate and placed extra burden on the refugees who often show their hospitality.

The MFTs were also told by many refugee parents that children below 16 years of age were not offered language training, which is also contrary to legislation. Other vulnerable people like mothers with small children, people with medical conditions or learning difficulties tend to drop out of classes. “I did not ask for the training because I would be a real pain for any lecturer,” said an elderly woman from the Russian Federation. “I am trying to figure things out by myself. My friend was kind enough to give me a list with the latin alphabet and I am slowly trying to learn myself,” Khasent told the MFT.

© UNHCR/ L. Taylor

Czech Republic

Improvements for refugees and asylum-seekers

- In 2010, the Government made changes to the Asylum Act (which came into effect on 1 January 2011) allowing vulnerable people with subsidiary protection to stay in Integration Asylum Facilities for up to three months following a decision on their claims. While the allowed time is still too short, it is a positive step for many vulnerable people.

- The Ministry of Education has taken steps to improve language training, particularly taking into account the special needs of vulnerable groups like single mothers and those with medical conditions and to include children. While a new methodology needs yet to be finalized and adopted, the Government has revised the terms of reference and engaged a new service provider to take the training forward as of September 2011.

- Interpreters working for the Ministry of Interior (MoI) received training, organized by UNHCR, at six different locations throughout the country. The sessions covered the specific needs of asylum-seekers and communication concerns which may occur during interviews, as well as ethics. The sessions grew out of discussions between UNHCR and the MoI over concerns raised during previous participatory assessment processes.

- Decision makers in the asylum procedure also attended trainings organized by UNHCR on issues regarding the quality of decision making highlighted through the asylum quality project. This was also an opportunity to address important issues for decision makers when working with interpreters.

- Teachers of resettled children received specialized training by UNHCR in 2010, as part of the broader project to address the education needs of refugee children.

Recommendations

- The MoI should inform each asylum-seeker of the reasons for delay in cases where the statutory 90 day deadline for a decision on their claim cannot be met. If the procedure requires additional interviews, the applicant should be informed of the reasons.

- In cases where the decisions are not delivered within 90 days, the residence visas of asylum-seekers should be extended from the current one month to three or six months.

- As part of the asylum procedure, each applicant should receive information in a language they understand about the process, how the results will be communicated and of the possibility to complain about treatment by the authorities.

- Each person staying in an asylum facility should receive written information in a language they understand on the possibility to complain about the conduct of facility staff and the services provided by NGOs. The information should include how to make a complaint, how the complaint will be handled and results communicated, and provided to each newly arriving resident as part of the introductory briefing.

- Interpreters should be available during asylum procedure interviews, in accommodation centres and elsewhere for those asylum-seekers living in private accommodation who may need help accessing medical care or other services.

- Separated children whether asylum-seekers, refugees or holders of subsidiary protection should receive specifically targeted information on the asylum procedure, possible appeal mechanisms, their international protection status, the guardianship system and roles of guardians, and assistance available to them. The information should be provided in a language spoken by the child and in a format they can understand.

- Effective legal and social counselling should be available to all asylum-seekers, refugees and others with international protection in languages they can understand whether they stay in government-run centres or in private accommodation. Written information on available services should be shared in relevant languages as early as possible. If necessary, European Refugee Funds (ERF) could be sourced for these activities regardless of whether the service provider is a NGO or government agency.

- New strategies and resources are required to ensure asylum-seekers and people with international protection can access and effectively enjoy the mainstream health care system. This may need to include covering travel costs, interpretation, and medicines. People should be informed as early as possible about how the health care system works and what assistance is available.

- The Ministries of Education and Interior should reconsider the language scheme under the State Integration Programme to ensure everyone with international protection, including children, people with special learning needs and other vulnerable people, can benefit and ensure that the training takes place in an appropriate language training space and all the students are provided with their text books.

- Children should receive targeted language training. As concerns the enrolment of children in mainstream education system, education experts need to assess their special learning needs and provide adequate assistance.

- It is recommended that the MoI continues to organize training for decision makers and interpreters involved in the asylum procedure. Decision makers should receive regular feedback on their work and asylum interviews should be recorded.

- All staff (including those working for private companies through outsourcing arrangements) working with asylum-seekers, refugees or others with international protection should receive at least introductory training on international protection and the needs of those applying for it.

- The MFT encourages the Ministry of Education to move the facility for separated children to a location more conducive to integration. It also recommends splitting the location of children applying for international protection from children with addictions or behavioral problems placed under state care in the same facility.

- In detention facilities, where personal security check-ups are unavoidable they should be carried out in full respect of the personal dignity of asylum-seekers.

- People being released from detention should receive logistical support from the authorities, and simply presented information on whom to contact in case of need.

- With the possible support of the ERF, authorities should support leisure activities, language and social and cultural orientation programmes which help build self-reliance in the asylum facilities.

Statistics

The number of asylum applications continued to drop in 2010, following a trend from the past few years. Only 833 applications were lodged in 2010, compared to 1,258 lodged in 2009. In 2008, 1,656 claims were lodged in the Czech Republic. The major countries of origin of those seeking international protection in 2010 were Ukraine, Mongolia, Belarus.

In 2010, 125 people were granted refugee status and 104 given subsidiary protection representing significant increases from previous years. In 2009, there were 75 refugee recognitions and 28 people given subsidiary protection. In 2008, 157 and 132 people were given refugee and subsidiary protection status respectively.

© UNHCR/ A. Szobolits

Hungary

In 2010, asylum-seekers and refugees in Hungary found improved support particularly where individuals or private organizations invested extra time and energy. The various government entities involved in different phases of the asylum procedure worked more effectively together than in the past, reducing waiting periods and uncertainty for those seeking asylum in Hungary.

From discussions with recognized refugees it has become clear that the support for their integration has to be better funded and more systematic – especially to facilitate learning the language and getting a job, both critical elements of integration.

An area where 2010 saw several problematic developments was in the increased detention of asylum-seekers. Detention centres were generally ill prepared to host asylum-seekers, incidents of violence have occurred and, at times, access to the asylum procedure has, allegedly, been denied. The closure of the ill-prepared facilities and better training of guards in the future is expected to alleviate the situation for asylum-seekers who one day, if recognized as refugees, will have to integrate into Hungarian society.

Methodology

The 27 members of the Multi-Functional Team (MFT) came from UNHCR, the Ministries of Interior and National Resources, the Ombudsman's Office, the Office of Immigration and Nationality and the following NGOs: Artemisszio Foundation, Menedek Association, Hungarian Red Cross, the Helsinki Committee and the Hungarian Reformed Church.

The participatory assessment was carried out between 27 September and 1 October 2010 in 17 locations across Hungary including Csongrád, Kiskunhalas, Békéscsaba, Nyírbátor, Debrecen, Bicske, Győr, Zalaegerszeg, the Budapest international airport and the Than Károly Elementary School in the capital.

The following thematic areas were covered in the assessment: reception conditions (including everyday life in centres for asylum-seekers, health, security, social and legal assistance), education, integration, and the conditions of detention for asylum-seekers in police centres.

The MFT used focus group discussions, participatory observation, semi-structured and household interviews to involve asylum-seekers and refugees in the study. To avoid a bias by the most outspoken persons, the assessment sessions were not publicly announced in the centres; instead, selected individuals were invited representing different age and gender categories. This report reflects the experiences and views expressed by 454 people who are either asylum-seekers or beneficiaries of international protection. The large majority (416) were men and boys. Of these, 164 people were interviewed while in detention. Thirty-two interviews were children, with the majority separated from their families. A dozen participants were younger than 14 years.

No cot for the baby, no coat for the winter

The Multi-Functional Team (MFT) had a close look at the reception conditions in several centres where asylum-seekers are accommodated in Hungary, and found a number of areas of concern. The most basic hygienic conditions are not met in some of the reception centres while some police detention centres where asylum-seekers stay had higher standards. There was regular distribution of clean linen in Csongrad in southern Hungary and regular disinfection of mattresses in Budapest, for example, which does not take place at reception centres dedicated to house asylum-seekers.

Separated children staying in a facility in Bicske (west of the capital), jointly run by the Interchurch Aid and the Office for Immigration and Nationality (OIN), live with dirty linen and broken showers. Inhabitants of the centre in Debrecen in the east of Hungary had to share their beds with bed bugs and rooms with cockroaches. Those detained in the same city did not receive enough soap or shampoo.

Despite some improvements in the health services in Debrecen (a paediatrician is now available twice a week), the team found deficiencies in all reception centres in Hungary. Interpreters are not available for consultations with doctors in Debrecen and Bicske, and asylum-seekers' access to specialized treatment required for glasses and physiotherapy is limited due to financial barriers in Debrecen and for separated children in Bicske. In Békéscsaba in the south-east of Hungary, pregnant women complained that there was no special care for them at all. In the pre-integration facility in Bicske, babies do not have proper cots, enough diapers and no other special food except milk. The psycho-social counselling and treatment for Post-traumatic Stress Disorder previously facilitated by the Cordelia Foundation in a day clinic in Bicske, has been scaled down dramatically due to lack of funding.

In the eastern centres of Nyírbátor and Debrecen and in Bicske, asylum-seekers did not receive enough warm clothes for the winter. In the Csongrad detention facility and in Békéscsaba reception centre shoes were lacking as were clothes for pregnant women.

In the facility for separated children in Bicske, the residents were not satisfied with the food which was found to be poor in quality and nutritional


© UNHCR/ B. Szandelszky

value, so they started cooking their own meals. But the assistance of 7,125 Hungarian Forint per month (about 26 Euro at the time of publication) was not enough to cover a basic diet. In Békéscsaba, too, asylum-seekers said they had difficulty buying small items they needed. The local shop, they complained, would charge three to four times more than in the town.

In the reception centre in Debrecen, access to legal counselling was a problem despite the right of every asylum-seeker in the EU to be informed about his or her procedure and its implications.

A new concern arose for members of the MFT in 2010 about the accommodation of asylum-seekers alongside other categories of aliens. The OIN reception centre in Debrecen is now hosting people with 'tolerated stay' (usually rejected asylum-seekers who are allowed to stay for a period for technical reasons) and other aliens subject to policing measures for illegal entry to Hungary but who have not claimed international protection. As these groups are in a completely different situation with different rights and entitlements, their mixing under the same roof may cause serious difficulties in daily practice and perceptions. The MFT therefore suggests that OIN reception centres either host exclusively asylum-seekers or alien policing cases. Ideally, asylum-seekers could be accommodated in private homes which will help facilitate the integration into society for those who are recognized as refugees.

The school, a would-be place for integration

The strong potential of education as a vehicle for the speedy integration of refugees and their children remains to be fully exploited in Hungary. The MFT observed good progress where individual professional teachers or local municipalities undertook extra efforts. In Bicske, the children's schooling was generally found to be satisfactory. The Kossuth Zsuzsa Elementary School in Bicske left a particularly positive impression. Teachers were committed to working with illiterate children, and followed individual education plans in a flexible, tolerant and professional way. The team behind this report recognizes these daily and sustained endeavours of individuals. But a more systematic approach to the education needs of separated and other children in flight is still outstanding. Even if special preparatory classes are well organized and based on individual educational levels, the classes do not necessarily meet the criteria of compulsory education for school age children. It should be ensured that children can move on to regular classes as soon as possible after this preparation. Full access to mainstream education is generally hindered in Békéscsaba and Bicske, while the situation has significantly improved in Debrecen.

A forum called Migrant Working Group which brought together government and non-governmental actors for information sharing and coordination in the field of education has ceased to function since the new government took over in June 2010. No other forum to foster good educational practices has yet been established in its place.

Overall, the MFT came to the conclusion that the reception conditions of asylum-seekers provide a bad basis for integration for those granted some form of international protection who will stay to rebuild their lives in Hungary.

Refugees need help to help themselves

Refugees feel great pressure to integrate quickly but lack critical assistance in the integration process. As Roble Nadif, a refugee from Somalia, put it while talking about the daily experience of refugees. “In order to help somebody’s life, it is not enough to give them food three times a day.” Refugees are expected to find a job, arrange private housing and become financially self-sufficient all in the space of a year. Residents of the pre-integration facility in Bicske felt one hour of Hungarian lessons per day and the assistance for job seekers was not enough. “The time may be sufficient but we do not get enough help for this,” said Zemar Qaderi, an Afghan single man with subsidiary protection. “Hungarian people are nice and kind but it is the Hungarian government that should do more for us,” said another Afghan Anoushirvan Kohistani. Roble Nadif even made a concrete proposal: “Whether we have cultural orientation courses?! My God, how I wish we had!”

At the pre-integration facility in Biscke, the vocational training that had been announced could not be offered due to technical problems. Women were disappointed their internet room was always locked hampering access to information which could help with integration. As a Palestinian refugee married to an Albanian woman put it: “We wanted the local authority to come here, we wanted the United Nations to come here, but nothing happened. We wanted to contact UNHCR, but they wouldn´t even give us the address or phone number,” he explained. The MFT felt that the provision of books at the facility and access to professional day care could help people use the time it takes to find a job more efficiently and prepare for job interviews. Generally, the support for finding employment was considered to be insufficient.

> *“In order to help somebody’s life, it is not enough to give them food three times a day.”*

Locked up for seeking asylum

While international law sets restrictions on the detention of asylum-seekers, detention appears to have become the rule rather than the exception in Hungary. The Hungarian administration considers the irregular crossing of its border an administrative offence and is increasingly putting asylum-seekers behind bars even when they immediately declare their intention to claim asylum.

The MFT behind this report met asylum-seekers in police lock-ups designed for short term stays (up to 72 hours) and were concerned at the lack of open space making these facilities inadequate for longer periods of detention. The team felt this could potentially lead to mental health problems. “From Hungary we have only seen the fence of the camp. We would like to see Békéscsaba, Debrecen, Budapest,” said 17-year-old Pashah Achakzai from Afghanistan.

An overly simplified age assessment carried out by authorities is putting boys and girls behind bars. The assessment does not apply the ‘benefit of the doubt’ principle; nor does it reflect the best interests of the child. At Kiskunhalas, a detention facility in southern Hungary with limited psychosocial and legal counselling, the officials did not appear to carry out any age assessment. While two Afghan boys claimed to be 17 years, their age was consistently recorded as being higher by officials. Their asylum applications were not registered and they were not informed about the possibility to consult a lawyer – both omissions are at variance with Hungary´s international obligations under the Refugee Convention and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

> *“From Hungary we have only seen the fence of the camp. We would like to see Békéscsaba, Debrecen, Budapest.”*

Concerns about ill treatment in detention

Several asylum-seekers in Kiskunhalas told the MFT they had no idea why they were in detention and for how long. Due to scant information and lack of quality interpretation to facilitate communication with the Hungarian-speaking guards, the Afghans lived in fear of being expelled to the place they had just left and where they claimed to have faced danger and persecution.

Detainees were moved around between facilities which limited their access to legal counselling. Asylum-seekers reported several incidents which warranted an intervention by superiors: verbal, psychological and even physical harassment including beatings and racist comments occurred in police detention at Kiskunhalas, and threats by guards in Kiskunhalas and Nyírbátor. The use of a leash when escorting detainees to court hearings, hospital, banks or post office outside of the perimeters of the detention facility (i.e. public areas) was considered inhumane and degrading, particularly by Afghan asylum-seekers. In Győr in the west of Hungary, guards were reportedly locking people in cells during the day as a means of punishment and using gas sprays. “We are treated like dogs,” said Sidiq Azadzoi, an elderly Afghan applicant for international protection.

Illiterate asylum-seekers were found in a particularly vulnerable position as many requests for seeing a medical doctor or lawyer, for example, are required to be made in writing.

Positive developments were observed in the Budapest detention facility where Muslim residents were able to observe their religious rights including ritual washing at prayer times. Here, asylum-seekers also received fruits and juices; they could wash and dry their clothes and their petitions were documented. In Debrecen, there were also some good detention conditions reported including the presence of an interpreter who eased communication on a daily basis.

Asylum-seekers said that when asking guards to buy things outside the compound, they did not always get a receipt. In Kiskunhalas, where the quality and quantity of the food led to the need for additional purchases by the residents, the MFT was told everything seemed to cost 30 Euros. The MFT believes a system to register requests for goods and provision of receipts would help address perceptions of corruption.

Some guards do not differentiate between groups of clients. In police detention centres in Hungary, asylum-seekers live side-by-side with alien policing cases including foreign criminals and drug addicts ready for deportation. Asylum-seekers felt they were sometimes handled as if they were also criminals. “We are innocent, we haven’t committed any crime, why do we have to sit in jail?” Antar Aissa from Algeria asked.

Guards were reportedly tightening already strict house rules akin to high security prisons. In Nyírbátor in the east of the country, physical exercise inside the building was prohibited. Phone calls are restricted to five minutes and visitors to 20 minutes instead of 45.

Overall, the MFT observed that the detention regime was applied longer than the 15 days maximum foreseen by the law applicable at the time of the assessment. In this context, ECtHR judgment Lokpo & Touré v. Hungary found that Hungary violated Article 5 para 1 of ECHR (20 September 2011). This report describes the findings as they were at the time of the participatory assessment in 2010. At the time of publication, the legal situation has since changed allowing for even longer periods in detention and for improvement in access to support services.

> *“We are innocent, we haven’t committed any crime, why do we have to sit in jail?”*

Improvements for asylum-seekers

- The Hungarian government has set up a recruitment plan for additional guards for the detention centres. It is hoped that well-selected and well-trained guards can help improve the atmosphere and living conditions behind bars.
- Education has improved for children hosted in Debrecen where special preparatory courses are meant to guide them to regular classes, though it is not always ensured as quickly as would be desirable to avoid stigmatization.
- The Hungarian Reformed Church offered different support programmes assisting residents with housing, schooling for the children and Hungarian language classes followed by vocational nanny trainings for women.

Recommendations

- Detain asylum-seekers only in exceptional, justified cases. Stop detaining minors.
- Introduce a complex age assessment with medical and psycho-social exam as stipulated by the General Comment no 6 (2005) of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child and requested by the Hungarian Ombudsman in his report 7120/2009.
- Change the legislation to ensure that asylum seeking couples, detained for administrative reasons, can be accommodated together.
- Ensure that every detainee in Győr who wishes to file an asylum application gets access to the appropriate procedure.
- Detain criminals and drug addicts separately from asylum-seekers if the detention of the latter is considered unavoidable and within the law, particularly in the detention facility in Budapest.
- Avoid the use of handcuffs and leashes in case of asylum-seekers who did not commit any crime but merely crossed the ‘green border’ to seek international protection.
- Urgently improve the legal and social counselling of detainees, particularly in the Temporary Detention Centre in Debrecen and in Kiskunhalas. Social workers should be employed to provide improved social counselling.
- Register and properly document all complaints of detainees to help verify whether they have been passed on to management for appropriate follow-up.
- Prioritize the identification and systematic provision of professional social services to torture victims and victims of other forms of violence.
- Provide detailed information to detainees on procedures, the Dublin regulation, the reasons for detention and about their individual cases to reduce feelings of uncertainty. Provide information on voluntary return and access to lawyers, especially at the detention site Győr.
- Avoid keeping asylum-seekers and people under alien policing procedure in the same OIN facility in Debrecen in order to prevent misunderstandings, tensions, and frustration due to their different status, rights and obligations.
- Accede to the Optional Protocol of the UN Convention Against Torture and set up an independent national monitoring mechanism for unannounced checks of detention sites. This

recommendation to Hungary is based on the finding that current oversight roles in the area of detention have neither prevented children from ending up behind bars nor freed asylum-seekers who were in the regular asylum procedure and who have already endured 15 days of detention.

- Establish efficient individual integration plans for recognized refugees.
- Inform beneficiaries of international protection about their rights and obligations.
- Assist refugees to find a job in Hungary as a key step for their integration.
- Ensure that foreign children like asylum-seekers receive education in regular classes as soon as possible for quicker linguistic and social integration.
- Improve medical services by employing helpful, willing and specialized personnel, including dentists, particularly at the pre-integration facility in Bicske. Avoid potentially dangerous misunderstandings in medical treatment by providing sufficient interpretation services for consultations.
- Create jobs within the pre-integration facility in Bicske.

Statistics

In 2010, 2,104 people filed new asylum claims in Hungary. This is less than half the number of applications submitted in this Central European country in 2009 (4,672) and also below the number of claims received in 2008 (3,118). The main places of origin of aslyum-seekers were Afghanistan, Kosovo and Palestine.

2010 also saw a decline in the number of people receiving international protection: 74 people were granted refugee status (55 per cent less than in 2009) and 173 asylum-seekers were allowed to remain in Hungary either with tolerated stay or subsidiary protection status (20 per cent less than the year before).

© UNHCR/ B. Szandelszky

Poland

While refugees and others with international protection in Poland receive integration assistance and have, in many respects, the same rights as Polish citizens, most still struggle to find their feet in everyday life. Housing and employment remain constant obstacles and far too many refugees are at risk of homelessness. Refugees feel that formal integration programmes, while appreciated, do not really prepare them for the challenges of finding their way in Poland.

The number of asylum applications declined in 2010 by 38 per cent from the previous year, and five out of 15 reception centres were closed in November following a review by the Office for Foreigners. Officials say that price and quality of services were the key criteria used to identify centres for closure. At the same time, two new facilities were opened including one specifically for single women.

Poland has the highest number of children among asylum-seeker and refugee populations of any EU country. Children comprise more than 50 per cent of these groups and ensuring they have access to education and leisure activities is critically important. In 2010, access to education continued to improve with many schools employing extra help to assist refugee and asylum-seeking children. But in some reception centres, children still lack access to kindergartens and sport activities despite improvements.

Methodology

In Poland, the interviews for this Participatory Assessment Report were carried out between May and October 2010. The Multi-Functional Teams (MFTs) comprised staff of UNHCR, the Rule of Law Institute, Caritas, Polish Red Cross, Helsinki Foundation, Foundation of Education and Creativity, the Ocalenie Foundation, officials from the Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, Police, Office for Foreigners, Voievodship Offices in Mazowieckie, Podlaski and Lubelskie and a number of representatives from City/Poviat Centres for Family Assistance.

The teams visited seven reception centres including Czerwony Bór in the Podlaskie region, Linin and Radom in the Mazowieckie region, and Lublin, Łuków, Biała Podlaska, Kolonia Horbów in the Lubelskie region. The MFTs also met with refugees and other people granted international protection at the premises of the Rule of Law Institute in Lublin, the Foundation of Education and Creativity in Bialystok, and the Helsinki Foundation for Human Rights in Warsaw.

Some 220 people took part in the interviews, with the vast majority of them being asylum-seekers from the Russian Federation of Chechen origin. In general, the level of participation in the AGDM process by asylum-seekers and refugees and those with humanitarian stay was high. People were interested to share their concerns with the interview teams.

A less than warm welcome

While a national survey found Poles believe their country should accept refugees because Poles themselves once had to flee to safety, there are, at times, different attitudes in local neighbourhoods hosting reception centres for foreigners. In Lomza and Bialystock several incidents occurred in which asylum-seekers received a less than warm welcome from the local community, with tensions escalating to verbal and physical attacks. In Lomza, the local community - rallied by a local politician - lobbied heavily for the closure of the reception centre saying foreigners take jobs and scarce housing from locals. The centre was one of those closed by the end of 2010 (ostensibly for failing to meet selection criteria) and residents have since moved elsewhere, many into private accommodation in the same area. But the experience left many asylum-seekers feeling vulnerable.

By contrast, the new Targowek reception centre for single female asylum-seekers in Warsaw and the new Grotniki centre near Lodz were opened without protest from local communities and residents felt welcomed. The opening of both centres was accompanied by information campaigns conducted by the Office for Foreigners and the NGO Polish Migration Forum and authorities say this made all the difference.

Where will the children play?

Despite the opening of new playgrounds and kindergartens in three reception centres, residents remained concerned at the lack of leisure activities and facilities for children. There are few social workers and volunteers to organise excursions to visits to cinemas and museums, for example. In more remote areas, there are no activities or volunteers to organise excursions or help with homework as the NGO presence declines.

In reception centres, children told research teams that there were limited opportunities for leisure especially in bad weather when it is not possible to play outside. “We like to play outside the buildings, but when the weather is bad there is nothing to do,” said Ahmed Zakulov an 11-year-old asylum-seeker from the Russian Federation. In summer holidays, children said they were bored and left alone when there was no school. Some centres still lack playgrounds. Across the board, children said they lacked indoor sports facilities to use in winter or when it’s raining. Boys in particular said they would like organised sports classes and to go to the gym. Almost all children asked for organised swimming.

Even where kindergartens do exist in reception centres, they open for only a couple of hours per day when a guardian is present. The rest of the time, children cannot enter. The children pro-

© UNHCR/ B. Szandelszky

posed that the kindergartens remain open longer with caretakers speaking the Polish language so they can learn it quickly.

Indeed, research teams have found over the years that kindergartens play an important role in facilitating integration especially outside of reception centres. Children who attend kindergartens in the local community integrate faster, learn Polish quickly, and are more quickly oriented socially into their new country. At the same time, more intense interaction of adults with Polish parents met through kindergartens eases their orientation into society. Where they are able to place their children in kindergartens, foreign parents have more time to attend pre-integration activities like Polish language classes organized in the reception centre or vocational training.

> *"We like to play outside the buildings, but when the weather is bad there is nothing to do."*

Schools continue to improve services

Access to education for asylum-seeking children continued to improve in 2010, continuing a trend since 2005. Legal changes came into effect that year introducing teacher assistants to address the special needs of asylum-seekers and refugees. Some schools have already employed extra help, while others are preparing to do so.

In the 2010 interviews, there were very few complaints about access to education with parents saying they had no problems enrolling children in school or with transport. While there were a few complaints about delays on the provision of text books, most children told researchers they like going to schools and meeting new friends.

Some newly arrived children and very young children from Chechnya who had not yet learned Russian reported they had problems with language at school. They said that starting school straight away without any Polish made them feel alienated and this can influence attendance rates later on. At the same time, schools have some difficulty assessing the proper grade for children, especially adolescents with limited schooling or knowledge of Polish.

Lost and confused

Uncertainty about their legal status weighed heavily on most foreigners who took part in the 2010 interviews. Asylum-seekers told the research team of their mounting frustration in drawn-out procedures to grant refugee status. While refugee status determination procedures typically take about six to eight months in Poland, most rejected asylum-seekers lodge repeat applications which prolongs the process further. There was growing concern at the number of negative decisions and an uncertain future with many expressing fear at having to return to their countries. “We only wait, wait and wait,” said Ruslan Magomiedov, an asylum-seeker from Chechnya.

Residents of reception centres felt they were not updated quickly enough on changes to laws which affect them. People said they felt left alone, and often do not have the time to travel to NGOs or other offices to receive updated information due to work or school commitments. There were many complaints about the limitations of legal assistance, which is only provided by NGOs, particularly for people living in rural areas. Specialised NGOs tend to operate in larger cities and lack the budget for regular travel to all reception centres. Foreigners also lack the means to travel to the cities to seek legal assistance.

All these problems are compounded by a poor knowledge of Polish among asylum-seekers and a lack of trust in information when it is received, possibly resulting from cultural differences. Government and NGO team members felt the limited knowledge of Polish fuels misunderstandings with the determination procedure, and the duties and obligations of asylum-seekers. NGO workers felt poor language skills also prevented asylum-seekers and refugees from seeking help from local authorities and the police.

In some areas, asylum-seekers and refugees reported some officials lacked inter-personal and intercultural skills and were unprepared to work with foreigners. People said that officials were reluctant to provide information and had a very limited understanding of the situation of asylum-seekers and refugees in Poland. In areas more used to hosting foreigners, the situation was considered better.

© UNHCR/ B. Szandelszky

Reception centre conditions good for bed bugs too

The warmer weather and milder winter in 2010 fuelled a rise in bed bugs in several reception centres, asylum-seekers told research teams. Authorities say regular disinfections do take place, but that some residents do not allow sanitary teams to enter the rooms. Authorities also allege that the keeping of food in sleeping rooms exacerbates the problem and limits the effectiveness of disinfection.

Variety of food could improve

While there were comparatively few complaints about food provided in reception centres for asylum-seekers, residents would like to be involved in the preparation of the menu and asked for more fruits and vegetables in their daily diet. “We eat only potatoes and potatoes,” said one respondent complaining about the low variety in meals. While the price of food has increased in Poland in recent years, the calculation of the financial quota for daily nutrition has not changed meaning centres have less funds to provide a balanced diet. In some centres, like Kolonia Horbow, residents are consulted about the menu. Throughout Ramadan in 2010, all centres provided dry food alongside ready meals so those observing the religious period could do so in accordance with their requirements.

Asylum-seekers and refugees troubled by quality of medical care

While the complaints about medical help have declined in 2010, a lack of trust in the quality of care persists among asylum-seekers and refugees. According to asylum-seekers some doctors tend to prescribe the same medicines for different diseases, fuelling dissatisfaction. Others reported they were happy with the treatment they received. Meanwhile, the government reports difficulty in finding medical staff to work in the reception centres.

Many foreigners in Poland require specialized medical attention, and the basic care provided in reception centres is not sufficient. Some men and women with complex medical problems reported difficulties receiving referrals to specialists. People reported problems with language and cultural misunderstandings and there were complaints about some medical staff in Bialystok and Lukow.

Integration programmes fall short

Once people receive refugee status or subsidiary protection, they may start an individual integration programme run by the government. Typically, the programme includes a financial allowance to cover living costs and learning Polish, legal, psychological and family counselling if required, and information on how to contact job search centres, local community groups and NGOs who can help.

But overall, refugees and others do not find the programme effective. While the courses in Polish language and vocational trainings were appreciated, people feel the programme does not meet their integration needs. They suggest that the programme could be longer and could allow people to combine work and language learning. Indeed, people felt that some requirements of the programme actually impede integration including the obligation to attend Polish language classes and have regular meetings with a social worker, which can make it impossible to undertake full-time work.

A place to call home still out of reach

Refugees said difficulty finding a place to live is the most serious problem facing them in Poland. Almost all interviewed refugees in Poland experience housing exclusion at some point and are at risk of homelessness.

Refugees and others granted subsidiary protection say rents at market prices are unaffordable for them. To rent a flat, a tenant has to pay a deposit and the first month's rent upfront. Refugees who receive their integration allowance only as they depart the reception centre simply do not have the ready cash. In larger cities, rents are too high for refugee families and in rural areas there is a shortage of apartments to rent. The social housing system is not adequate to cover the need and in many places, one needs to wait several years to qualify for an apartment.

While refugees recognise that Poles are also affected by the shortage of social flats, those with large families face additional challenges and the prejudice of landlords. Property owners routinely demand higher rents from refugees or migrants than from Poles. As Umar Dobgiegov, a 48-year-old man from the Russian Federation with subsidiary protection, explains: "It can happen that if they find out that I am from Russia, they automatically raise the price, by a couple of hundred zlotys, which already exceeds the amount which I could comfortably pay when working."

Even for those who do find an apartment to rent, owners often won't formalize the rental contracts (for tax reasons or to avoid problems ending the contract) and refuse to let foreigners register the place of residence. This only leads to more problems as Ludmila Jakobczenko, a 33-year-old woman from the Russian Federation explains: "Without the registration you cannot get PESEL – personal identification number. Without PESEL, you cannot register your children in a school or see a doctor. It is like a never ending story."

> *"It can happen that if they find out that I am from Russia, they automatically raise the price, by a couple of hundred zlotys, which already exceeds the amount which I could comfortably pay when working."*

There tends to be a particular shortage of apartments in the vicinity of several reception centres and refugees are often reluctant to move to another city which they don't know. In some places, like Lublin, there is no regulation by the City Council allowing people with subsidiary protection to receive social apartments. It is an option for refugees only who finalized their integration programs in Warsaw. On a more positive note, in Warsaw the local government guarantees five flats to be distributed among refugee families every year. While in Lublin, there are two so-called "protected" apartments providing temporary accommodation to refugees while searching for their own place.

© UNHCR/ B. Szandelszky

Finding legal work remains elusive

Unemployment is high and on the rise in Poland, aggravating an existing reluctance by Poles to offer jobs to foreigners. Foreigners are mostly offered poorly paid, menial jobs which are short-term and without proper contracts. As Magomied Tarabakov, a refugee from the Russian Federation put it: "Women are cleaners; men most frequently work on building sites or they might just possibly find skilled work somewhere."

Refugees and asylum-seekers said finding a job was their second biggest problem, after finding a place to live. Many refugees feel that employers think giving them a job would involve additional efforts and costs, as they are unaware of the equal rights to employment those with international protection hold in Poland alongside local citizens. Employers wrongly think refugees need a work permit and that employing them would be complicated and time consuming. At the same time, refugees would feel more confident with more knowledge on their rights and obligations to ease negotiations with employers.

In addition, many foreigners don't have the skills required for the local market and poor knowledge of Polish exacerbates the issue. For those who can find jobs, they complain the wages are too low to support a large family.

Refugees even have problems accessing the benefits for unemployed people. While they receive a special allowance on the integration programme once that is finished, refugees face problems receiving unemployment benefits because they often cannot meet the requirement to have at least one year's work experience before receiving the allowance. The existing regulations do not meet the specific situation for refugees or those with subsidiary protection.

> *"Women are cleaners; men most frequently work on building sites or they might just possibly find skilled work somewhere."*

Improvements for asylum-seekers and refugees

- In an effort to improve the integration prospects for people granted protection, the Polish Government has extended the integration programme previously only offered to refugees to those people granted 'subsidiary protection' or humanitarian stay.

- Access to education for asylum seeking children continued to improve in 2010, with the number of complaints regarding access to education declining compared to previous years. Legal changes allowing teacher assistants to address the special needs of asylum-seekers and refugees have come into effect, and many schools are already employing extra help.

- New playgrounds and kindergartens opened in several reception centres.

- NGOs are providing more activities for children in Lomza, Bialystok and Lublin in many centres volunteers regularly visit to help and play with children.

- Fewer complaints about the quality of medical services suggest an improved quality of medical assistance compared to previous years.

© UNHCR/ B. Szandelszky

Recommendations

- Facilitate access for asylum-seekers to kindergarten care in the vicinity of reception centres and where there are no kindergartens in the neighborhood, establish kindergartens within centres. Provide sporting equipment and toys.

- Enhance access to quality medical services including specialized treatment. In addition, foster information sharing between medical staff and asylum-seekers and refugees.

- Ensure asylum-seekers have access to effective legal assistance.

- Provide vocational training in reception centres before the formal integration programme starts to allow people to gather skills needed to get a job.

- Ensure asylum-seekers, refugees and those with humanitarian stay are provided with information on legal changes which affect them, their rights and obligations, and services available to them.

- Organize advocacy activities, inter-cultural exchanges and awareness raising activities about refugees to support integration prospects and community acceptance, particularly in neighbourhoods with reception centres or high concentrations of refugees. More proactive efforts by authorities throughout Poland are required to inform local communities about reception centres and resolve any conflict.

- Secure access to housing including social housing for refugees and other people with international protection in Poland.

Access to education for asylum seeking children continued to improve in 2010, with the number of complaints regarding access to education declined compared to previous years.

© UNHCR/ B. Szandelszky

Recommendations proposed by asylum-seekers and refugees:

- Amend regulations to allow refugees to receive the integration allowance before they leave the reception centres so they can save the cash required for a deposit for rental accommodation.
- Facilitate regular meetings between officials in different institutions (e.g. the Police) to provide regular information to foreigners.
- To boost access to the labor market, run an information campaign among employer groups about the rights of foreigners with protection in Poland to work legally.
- Provide longer Individual Integration Programmes (currently one year) to allow foreigners to gain additional skills, and provide more Polish classes.
- Provide Polish classes throughout the year to facilitate children attending school to learn quickly.

Statistics

After a peak of 10,587 asylum applications submitted in Poland in 2009, only 6,534 people applied for international protection in 2010. This is a decrease of 38 per cent, and even lower than the 8,517 asylum applications lodged in 2008. Most asylum-seeekers in 2010 originated from Russia, Georgia and Armenia.

There was also a decrease in the number of people granted international protection in Poland. Only 82 people were recognized as refugees in 2010, a 38 per cent decrease from 2009. There was an 81 per cent drop in the number of people granted subsidiary protection in Poland in 2010, with only 438 people given subsidiary protection status compared to 2,377 in 2009.

© UNHCR/ B. Szandelszky

Romania

Romania was hit hard by the economic crisis in 2010 with cuts in social benefits, wages and jobs. Asylum-seekers also felt the financial squeeze when hot water in reception centres was restricted to only certain hours a day in the wake of budget cuts. On the other hand, despite financial pressures, a number of improvements were made in 2010 including the provision of computers and internet access in reception centres, and financial aid to resettled refugees in Galati.

The fundraising efforts of NGOs also helped improve access to education for resettled refugees and provide in-kind donations for asylum-seekers and refugees. This has been critical for asylum-seekers who do not have the right to work in the first year of their asylum procedure. They depend on a monthly allowance – equivalent to 85 Euro cents per day - that does not cover even the most basic needs of a person living in Romania.

Methodology

In Romania, this Age, Gender and Diversity Mainstreaming (AGDM) Report is the result of a process of participatory assessments carried out throughout 2010. For this, a Multi-Functional Team (MFT) was formed of UNHCR staff, a decision maker and an Integration Officer (from the Directorate for Asylum and Integration) designated by the Romanian Immigration Office (RIO), and staff from various NGOs active in the fields of asylum and integration. The NGOs were the Romanian Forum for Refugees and Migrants (ARCA), the Romanian National Council for Refugees (CNRR), the Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) and Save the Children Romania (SCR).

Between June and October, the MFT met refugees and others with subsidiary protection or tolerated stay, asylum-seekers, rejected asylum-seekers, as well as aliens in detention. They came from a wide range of countries and territories, including Afghanistan, Albania, Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Former Yugoslavia, Georgia, India, Moldova, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria, Tibet and Turkey.

The Participatory Assessment was conducted in the following locations:

- All RIO reception and detention centres in Arad, Bucharest, Galati (south-east), Otopeni (outside Bucharest), Radauti (north), Somcuta Mare (north-west) and Timisoara (south-west);
- The JRS dormitory in Galati;
- The Emergency Transit Centre (ETC) in Timisoara;
- In Bucharest and at the ETC in Timisoara for meetings with recognized refugees or other protection holders.

Children were also consulted for this report through a series of regular meetings with a total of 85 African and Asian boys and girls aged between seven and 18 years. The meetings were held between January and October 2010.

The MFT combined various research methods including semi-structured discussions and individual interviews, focus groups, observations and spot checks. The main themes for discussion were the handling of asylum applications (including at the border), the reception conditions and integration programs offered to people with protection in Romania.

"They saved our lives"

Women from Afghanistan who met the MFT in a reception centre in the north-eastern town of Radauti were full of praise for the first Romanians they came across – the border police. "They saved our lives," the Afghans said. "They saved our lives and those of our children," they repeated. These asylum-seekers from Asia had reached Romania in a truck where the border guards found them in bad shape following a long and hard journey full of fear and uncertainty.

Despite those good first impressions, many of the men, women and children who seek international protection in Romania go on to have less positive experiences and feel ill-informed about the process which determines their fate. Asylum-seekers in five regional centres of the Romanian Immigration Office (RIO) told UNHCR there was no or little communication with the local authorities. Several people complained they had inadequate information on the asylum system, even though there is information available in 10 languages (produced with EU funds) in the NGO counselling room of every reception centre. For example, they did not know about the Dublin system and its consequences for their lives. The Dublin regulation of the EU defines which country has to undertake the refugee status determination, i.e. the asylum procedure. In most cases, it is the EU country where a person is first registered as an asylum-seeker. If he or she moves on to another country where he or she may have relatives, friends or language skills, that person is usually returned to the country of his or her first asylum application.

Not speaking Romanian compounds the problems asylum-seekers face. Despite recent efforts by the Romanian National Council for Refugees (CNRR) to improve interpretation services through a government and EU-funded project, the multi-functional teams found that serious deficiencies remain. Interpreters are often inexperienced in asylum-related matters or simply unavailable in certain languages in some places.

Asylum-seekers said they considered the administrative process was lasting too long, especially those waiting for a determination on which country would process their asylum claims in the Dublin process. In some centres people complained about the quality of legal representation provided by local lawyers.

“How can he say I can return to Iraq?”

As a result of limited communication, asylum-seekers often did not understand the outcome of their procedures. Many openly complained about the quality of the decision making process. “He [the decision maker] says here that I lied”, the assessment team was told by Aysha, a young Iraqi asylum-seeker. “But I believe he did not really want to listen to me. I did not lie, I told the truth, how come he can say I can return to Iraq?”

Children find it even harder to make themselves understood amidst the unknown environment, the foreign language and the uncertainty. That is why unaccompanied minors are given legal representatives to help explain and guide them through the process. However, the children complained their representatives were not involved enough in their procedure and communication about their case was not adequate. As Atash Saghar, an Afghan child separated from his parents, told the research team: “The judge has never asked me any question. When I told her that I want to talk in front of her, she said she had no time, and eventually, she rejected my case.”

> *“The judge has never asked me any question. When I told her that I want to talk in front of her, she said she had no time, and eventually, she rejected my case.”*

The sick and the poor

According to many asylum-seekers, some basic healthcare services are not available. Medicine is lacking for some illnesses and medical staff are not trained to treat patients from Asia and Africa, with cultural and language barriers exacerbating communication difficulties. Doctors and nurses were often unaware of the right of asylum-seekers to free emergency medical care (according to Article 17 paragraph 1m of the Asylum Law). Female patients requested more female medical staff to be assigned to the centres where they live. There was no dental care whatsoever in any of the government centres of this EU country.

On the positive side, asylum-seekers living with HIV/AIDS receive free anti-retroviral treatment from the Romanian government. Equally, refugees interviewed in the centres in Timisoara and Galati were grateful for the medical attention they received from the doctors there.

Asylum-seekers and refugees felt the economic crisis in very tangible ways when, due to cost cuts, hot water was restricted to scheduled hours in reception centres leading to complaints. People were also concerned at the lack of cleaning material in several centres. They report that the inability to wash clothes properly has led to health problems in children. Asylum-seekers who want to comply with internal cleaning instructions had to buy cleaning materials from their limited allowance of 85 Euro cents per day.


© UNHCR/ B. Szandelszky

The allowance of 85 Euro cents per day is not enough to sustain a dignified life. A seven-year-old Afghan girl, Asal Nuri, in Radauti (northern Romania), who feels responsible for the well being of her family, told research teams: "If I only had a charmed ring I would just wish to live comfortable, to learn and have a life without stress, to have food and other things, for me and my family."

> *"If I only had a charmed ring I would just wish to live comfortable, to learn and have a life without stress, to have food and other things, for me and my family."*

Waiting for… understanding

Asylum-seekers say the single most aggravating factor for them in waiting several months and sometimes years for a decision on their claim is the fact that they are not allowed to earn a living in the first year of the procedure. People wait day in day out for the next step in the administrative process. The long period in limbo takes its toll mentally on people who say they need more understanding of their situation. In some centres, many asylum-seekers complained that they were faced with an unfriendly attitude on behalf of some RIO staff. While in two centres the people interviewed held the RIO staff and management in high regard, in several others even cultural or religious sensitivity appeared to be the exception rather than the rule. One asylum-seeker declared to UNHCR: "I was told by one important man in the centre that I should be careful because he can arrange with the court for me to be rejected and thus he can send me back to my country."

Cultural and gender sensitivity was not reflected in the way some of the activities in the centres are organized. In one centre, women were eager to do some sport but there was no special schedule for them separate from men. In other centres, women who wanted to avoid contact with foreign men, had to avoid the computer rooms altogether as there was no special time set aside for women.

The establishment of computer rooms for internet access in all centres was a clear improvement compared to 2009. However, the facility was not sufficiently organized and there were conflicts between different groups. Some people felt other groups were favoured.

Waiting for a new home country

Another group of people interviewed for this report were refugees in transit at the Emergency Transit Centre (ETC) in Timisoara. With the help of the Romanian Government and the International Organization for Migration, UNHCR is running the ETC for the temporary evacuation of people in need of international protection and their onward resettlement to their future home countries. In the ETC, the research team had focus group discussions with adults and teenagers coming from Palestine, Nigeria and Sri Lanka as well as with a group of children aged between four and twelve from Palestine and Sri Lanka.

The main concern of the refugees was with their long period in transit and the uncertainty surrounding their departure dates. While some refugees going to mainly Sweden, the Netherlands or the UK can depart in less than two months, others bound for the US, Canada or Australia can stay at the ETC between six and twelve months as the process is much more complex. UNHCR can only give departure dates when received in writing from resettlement countries. The refugees were at times dissatisfied with what they reported as contradictory information about their departure and proposed to have one particular week day for updates on their resettlement process. Overall, the refugees were satisfied with the type and the quantity of assistance received at the ETC, especially with food and daily activities. But they voiced their wish to be able to go out more often and to have some pocket money to buy sweets for their children.

Hygiene items provided to the refugees were an important issue, both for teenagers and women. Nevertheless refugees felt that some items provided should be changed to suit all individual needs, such as shampoo and hygienic pads.

The ETC provides spaces for football and basketball, as well as a gym room. Teenage boys requested more sports activities outside the centre like swimming and more intensive English language courses.

As a result of several accounts of domestic violence, all partners working at the ETC have committed themselves to work on customized solutions, depending on the composition of the population in transit at the facility.

Disappointed resettled refugees opt out of the integration process

Thirty-eight Myanmarese refugees of Kachin origin were resettled in Galati, in south-east Romania, in 2010 from Malaysia and were interviewed by the MFT two months after they arrived. The group was extremely unhappy about their current situation and what they felt was a dire socio-economic condition compared to their lives in Malaysia, where there were plenty of jobs and good wages. They claimed that the financial assistance and in-kind donations in Romania were not enough to sustain a decent living, and that they could not afford even to buy milk and diapers for the children. Some rejected the financial assistance eventually provided by the Government on the grounds that it was too low.

As some of them had assessed that the initial salaries they might earn in Romania would not cover all their needs, most did not want to actively participate in the integration process any longer. At the time of the interviews, only three families were putting effort into learning Romanian and seeking jobs in local businesses. Most families even refused to enroll their children into schools and kindergartens.

The refugees claimed they had been given confusing information about their new home country by the Romanian authorities and UNHCR during the cultural orientation course prior to their departure. They criticized Romania for not being a good resettlement country, demanding UNHCR send them to the USA or a Nordic country.

Group leaders emerged who influenced others to actually oppose integration and persuaded them not to bother learning the Romanian language. They were made to believe the best option was to leave Romania as soon as possible.

On several occasions, some refugees displayed a behaviour clearly expressing their unwillingness to respect the rules in their new living environment. Showers were vandalized and kitchen stoves were burned.

Some refugees voiced appreciation to the Government of Romania for having accepted them in the middle of its own economic crisis. In the meantime, the resettled refugees from Myanmar have moved to a centre in the capital Bucharest.

Integration starts with elementary needs…

At the Galati centre, pregnant women reported they could not use the squat toilets (the only type available) and there were no other alternatives provided. Another woman about to give birth was initially told to walk to the hospital by a guard before the centre eventually called an ambulance.

The more structural obstacle to integration relates to the labour market. Refugees felt the Romanian integration program did not provide the necessary assistance for refugees to start a new career in their new home country. Refugees find it difficult to have their diplomas or past qualifications recognized, which means that qualified people have little hope of finding work to fit their skills.

Elderly refugees felt that there was almost no chance for them to find a job and didn't know they could receive a pension. Later, at a national roundtable on vulnerable groups organized by UNHCR, it was revealed that elderly refugees could benefit from social pensions. NGOs and RIO will work towards that solution.

…and culminates in a popular soap opera

The team behind this report also met 40 people with some kind of international protection in the capital of the country, Bucharest. It became clear that there are success stories in refugee integration. One four-year-old son of a refugee from Mauritania in West Africa has made it into a popular soap opera. The boy is the unquestionable star of "Inima de Tigan" ("Gypsy Heart"), broadcast to hundreds of thousands of living rooms across Romania once a week.

His father, too, is an integration success. While the 43-year-old is not making use of his qualification in medicine, he does have an impressive career as the director of a bread producing company. And he shares his success by hiring other refugees anytime he can.

"Refugees find it difficult to have their diplomas or past qualifications recognized, which means that qualified people have little hope of finding work to fit their skills."

Improvements for asylum-seekers and refugees

The MFT has been following issues of concern to asylum-seekers and refugees for several years now. Thanks to constant follow-up, some reception conditions and other very tangible aspects of everyday life of people in flight in Romania have improved gradually. Here are some of the improvements of 2010:

- Computers with internet access have been put up in all RIO centres, allowing people to stay in touch with their relatives and follow developments related to their home country and to Romania.
- The RIO centre in Radauti took immediate action when problems with the access to family doctors and to health education were revealed by participatory assessments.
- Refugees from Myanmar resettled from Malaysia to Galati in eastern Romania, who had felt neglected and with little means to improve their socio-economic situation, received financial assistance as of August 2010.
- The Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) obtained in-kind donations from private institutions to cover urgent needs of the 38 Myanmarese refugees resettled to Galati in June and July 2010. While the rice supplied to them was still found short by 50 per cent, other food, hygiene products and cleaning material made the daily life in the centre much easier. JRS even found donors to give medical supplies to the Centre's medical cabinet which helped treat and prevent common diseases.
- In Galati, UNHCR's partner Save the Children Romania (SCR) accompanied parents and children to the doctor, hospitals and pharmacies which helped them be understood.
- SCR obtained donations so that resettled children from Myanmar in Galati could go to kindergarten, as well as to school and receive the necessary supplies for school and kindergarten, including clothes. Parents were provided with English-Romanian and Romanian-English dictionaries to help them communicate in their new environment. In addition, recreational activities outside the centre and a computer courses for children were made possible.
- At the ETC in Timisoara, the tensions observed in 2009 with the asylum-seekers also accommodated there have ceased.

Recommendations

- Train the staff at the RIO to improve communication with asylum-seekers and refugees. The ultimate aim should be that people understand in which legal and factual situation they are at any time.
- Provide more training (supported through the European Refugee Fund) for staff assessing asylum claims.
- Videoconferencing could help reduce the shortcomings with some interpreting services in interviews on the reasons someone fled their country.
- Medical staff at the regional centres of the RIO should comprise men and women, allowing female patients to be treated by female doctors.
- Address the lack of resources by giving asylum-seekers the permission to work earlier than one year after the commencement of the asylum procedure. This would allow them a decent living and reduce their vulnerability vis-à-vis black market employers.
- In the Galati centre, pregnant women should have access to a toilet which is not a “Turkish” one as the latter is very difficult to use under these circumstances.
- More NGOs should engage actively in fundraising for food and other donations to soften the socio-economic situation of refugees and asylum-seekers.

Statistics

In 2010, the number of asylum applications continued the downward trend from the previous few years. In 2008, 1,080 people applied for international protection; in 2009, only 995 applications were submitted and in 2010, 887 aslyum claims were lodged in the country. Asylum-seekers in Romania come mainly from Afghanistan, the Republic of Moldova, China and Iraq.

The number of people recognized as refugees or given subsidiary protection also decreased in 2010, having fluctuated over the past few years. In 2010, 88 people were given refugee status while 35 were given subsidiary protection. In 2009, 64 people were recognized as refugees and 30 given subsidiary protection. In 2008, 102 people were given refugee status and 36 given subsidiary protection.

© UNHCR/ B. Peterlin

Slovakia

This small Central European country had a manageable number of new asylum claims in 2010 and granted refugee status to just 15 people, and subsidiary protection to slightly over 50 others. In this participatory assessment, the support programmes to help people integrate were found to be deficient and many still struggle to learn the language, find a job and access medical care. In particular, people with subsidiary protection face problems gaining employment and getting medical help because their status is unknown and seen as transitory. A strong feeling of uncertainly prevails among this group as their status is renewed for only one year at a time even for those coming from protracted conflict situations.

Increased interpretation services throughout the asylum system in Slovakia would help avoid misunderstandings between asylum-seekers, refugees and others with international protection and their host community, and help people comprehend the procedures and conditions surrounding their stay.

Methodology

Multi-Functional Teams (MFT) were formed from members of civil society, government institutions and UNHCR to conduct structured interviews and participatory assessments about the lives of recognized refugees, beneficiaries of subsidiary protection and asylum-seekers in Slovakia. Apart from the Border and Aliens Police and the Migration Office, several other departments of the Slovak Ministry of Interior participated in the field research, which took place in August and September 2010. One person from the Central Office of Labour, Social Affairs and Family also took part. Among NGOs working with refugees and asylum-seekers, the Human Rights League, the Slovak Humanitarian Council, and ETP Slovakia took part in the study. The National UNICEF Committee was represented as well as experts from UNHCR´s Office in the Slovak Republic and from the Regional Representation for Central Europe in Budapest.

The MFTs met with recognized refugees and subsidiary protection holders in Kosice (eastern Slovakia), Trnava (western Slovakia), and Bratislava. Twenty-one of the participants were recognized refugees, while 47 were people held subsidiary protection. In addition, the MFT met with and assessed the situation for asylum-seekers in the reception centres of Humenné (eastern Slovakia), Rohovce (west) and Opatovska Nova Ves (central Slovakia), as well as in the Police Detention Units for Foreigners in Sečovce (eastern Slovakia) and Medvedov (across the Danube river at the Hungarian border, north of Györ. Unaccompanied minors were interviewed in Horne Orechove, a special children's home for this group, in the west of the country.

Altogether, the study included 165 people of whom five were older than 50 years, and 22 people were younger than 14 years of age. They originated from over a dozen countries with Afghans, Somalis and Iraqis representing the majority.

Good and bad experiences in residential centres

In reception and accommodation centres, asylum-seekers reported difficulties communicating their needs to social workers and other staff due to the lack of adequately trained interpreters. On the other hand, residents of the accommodation facility in Rohovce in western Slovakia were satisfied with the treatment by the personnel and about the food. They particularly praised the trips to the surroundings and Slovak historical sites organized by social workers from the Slovak Humanitarian Council.

Internet helps against feelings of isolation

Asylum-seekers regard internet access in reception centres as an important tool to manage their feelings of isolation. But it is not evenly provided across Slovakia. In Rohovce, asylum-seekers criticized the lack of internet access at the facility. "I would like to keep myself informed about developments in my country. Also this is the most efficient way how to get in touch with my family", declared Raakin Bathia, a man from India. Similar complaints were voiced at the Accommodation Centre in Humenné in the East of the country. In Opatovská Nová Ves, south of central Slovakia, good experiences were reported with the internet room which is available during the day in a coordinated way, avoiding tensions between residents. As Salim Permal, a Pakistani asylum-seeker explains: "Now when we have access to internet all the time, no one would argue which TV programme to watch."

Elsewhere, however, female asylum-seekers complained that television rooms, like gyms, are dominated by men who are in the majority and there is no scheduling to allow women to access facilities. An Afghan woman in her thirties, Uzma Atash, at Humenné, shared her frustration with the multifunctional team. "When I or any other woman wants to use these areas at our discretion, no special time for women is allocated. I do not want to exercise in the gym in male company, and I would also like to watch some TV series for women," she said.

> *"Now when we have access to internet all the time, no one would argue which TV programme to watch."*


© UNHCR/ B. Szandelszky

Showing your ID does not always help

Several asylum-seekers raised concerns about the identification documents issued by the Slovak Migration Office. They reported they were turned away at the bank when trying to transfer funds within the country and using the Slovak ID issued to them which lacks protective features. The MFT suggests issuing laminated IDs with the necessary protective measures against abuse and deterioration.

Better interpretation needed in all sectors

Good interpretation services are necessary for the smooth and humane handling of everyday situations for asylum-seekers and refugees. The MFTs repeatedly heard complaints about insufficient interpreting services in health facilities. The MFT recommends the use of these professional bridge builders in the health sector, and in the area of legal assistance. Lawyers are urged to rely on professional interpreters to explain the rights and obligations to people in the asylum procedure so that they fully comprehend their situation.

The MFT visited two police facilities where aliens including asylum-seekers are detained. According to the Slovak legislation, the period of detention for non-criminal reasons (such as irregular border crossing) can last six months or in "justified cases" up to 18 months. People who make asylum claims while in detention continue to be detained in order to prevent people from absconding.

UNHCR met with two foreigners from Georgia and the Russian Federation in one of the police centres who claimed that they were not given access to the asylum procedure after they were apprehended for irregular entry. "The police told us that we will go to an asylum facility, but instead we ended up in detention," they said. When asked about the incident, the police authorities replied in an official communication that the right to file a complaint (even with assistance of an attorney or a NGO social worker) was and always would be "unconditionally and indisputably respected" by border police. The MFT came to the conclusion that there was possibly a communication problem between the parties in this instance. Observing procedural guarantees such as the right to an independent interpreter is paramount at all stages of the asylum procedure – and to be able to verify whether foreigners are indeed allowed to exercise their right to seek asylum. Another conclusion of the MFT was that the border personnel should strengthen their communications skills, particularly in English.


© UNHCR/ B. Szandelszky

Subsidiary protection – precarious protection

Seeking asylum in the Slovak Republic inevitably involves a period of uncertainty for the claimants. But once recognized, people should gain some stability and have a predictable outlook on their lives. This is not always the case.

People with subsidiary protection in particular were frustrated by what they saw as limited professional and employment prospects. Their status is given for only for one year at a time. While it can be renewed, there are no exceptions to the one-year duration of the status even for people from countries with prolonged political and security problems. “Will they prolong my status so I can finish my studies here?” asked Mahmoud Ayoub, an Iraqi student. “We need asylum”, said Hassan Abtidoon, a 24-year-old man from Somalia. “But we have subsidiary protection. They prolong every year by another twelve months. Until when?”

The MFT shares the concerns about the negative impact of the uncertain status on this group of people. It recommends that the Migration Office also considers humanitarian, family and integration factors when deciding on the duration of subsidiary protection status. Slovakia’s neighbours in Central Europe grant subsidiary protection for much longer periods. For example, Hungary grants the status for five years, after which the grounds are reviewed. Poland and Romania give subsidiary protection for an indefinite period until it is cancelled. Slovenia gives an initial three years, with a two-year extension.

An unstable, limited residence increases the precarious economic situation of many beneficiaries of subsidiary protection. A typical case is 23-year-old Nyiaz Muayad from Iraq who spent five months looking for a job in Slovakia. “Employers are not interested to give me an opportunity, because they don´t know the status of subsidiary protection. My passport looks strange to them and it is only valid one year. And even if I persuade them to give me the job, then we need to obtain the work permit. This is a difficult barrier. There is no work for me, but I cannot give up, because I did not come as a tourist, I came to live in peace here and earn my own living. Finally, I found a job, they offered part-time and a simplified contract. I ended up with no job, because the Office of Labour gives a work permit only if you have a regular work contract.”

> *“Employers are not interested to give me an opportunity, because they don´t know the status of subsidiary protection. My passport looks strange to them and it is only valid one year.”*

In the reality of the Slovak labour market, people with subsidiary protection are required to have a work permit before they start the job. But a permit is only granted against a work contract for a specific job or promise of a job. And there seems to be room for interpretation, and several instances were reported where the Office of Labour did not provide the work permit whereas other permits were granted for similar circumstances.

Those with subsidiary protection also had problems visiting doctors, especially specialized examinations. In some instances, the document confirming their entitlement to medical care was simply not recognized. When the entitlement to health care is recognized it is often dependent on a social worker to facilitate the process. The MFT recommends more systematic addressing of this issue involving the Ministry of Health so that the Slovak Republic meets its international obligations.

People eager for structured language tuition

Refugees and others with international protection know how important it is to learn the local language. Some people were very happy with the existing language classes and expressed interest in a broader range Slovak language education. “We appreciate the lessons of Slovak. In Kosice we even receive the tickets for the transportation if we attend regularly. I think it would be useful to have more classes especially since I still could not find a job,” said Tajvar Saeidabadi, a recognized refugee from Iran.

Sargon Takla, a Syrian beneficiary of subsidiary protection in his thirties, highlighted the need to have certification of abilities and qualifications. “In my opinion we should attend some regular language school which can test and certify our level of Slovak language,” he suggested. Nineteen-year-old student Mahmoud Ayoub, who had fled from Iraq, added: “Finally I want to learn some useful things and become an engineer. I want to do something with my life to get good job. But how can I do this without any certificates from Slovak school?” The MFT recommends that the Ministry of Labour, Social Affairs and Family and the Education Ministry find possibilities of alternative recognition of educational achievements, in order to overcome this significant integration hurdle.

Challenges for asylum-seeking children

The MFT also had a close look at the situation of unaccompanied minors who face uncertainty when moved from one reception facility to another. Even the Children’s Home in Horné Orechové (in the west of the country), which has the best facilities for children is not free of challenges. Overall, the children´s facility lacks financial resources for legal assistance, for a regular psychologist, for teachers, and enough Slovak language school materials. The MFT was surprised to see that girls and boys were sometimes placed in the same facilities and requested separate ones for girls.

Improvements for asylum-seekers and refugees

- In a joint initiative with UNHCR, the Slovak Migration Office published updated simply presented information for asylum-seekers on their rights and obligations during the procedure. The information is available in 13 languages.

- Authorities introduced more flexible arrangements for asylum-seekers to leave the reception centres while maintaining the requirement (introduced in 2009) that people have written permission. The new arrangements more adequately meet the needs of individuals.

- Asylum-seekers in the centre in Opatovská Nová Ves now receive internet access all day. They are also allowed to grow and harvest plants and vegetables in the greenhouse of the facility. Both improvements were made possible through a project of the Goodwill Society with funding from the European Refugee Fund (ERF). Asylum-seekers in the Rohovce accommodation centre in western Slovakia also now have internet access thanks to a project run by the Slovak Humanitarian Council with ERF funds.

> *“We appreciate the lessons of Slovak. In Kosice we even receive the tickets for the transportation if we attend regularly. I think it would be useful to have more classes especially since I still could not find a job.”*

- New microwaves and electric ovens were provided in Rohovce, improving the kitchens for asylum-seekers in this centre.

- Leisure activities were introduced in Rohovce, improving conditions for the residents considerably. Trips to historic and important sites of the Slovak Republic helped the asylum-seekers learn more about the history, culture and national heritage of their host country. The excursions were made possible by the Slovak Humanitarian Council in cooperation with the Foundation of Milan Simecka.

Recommendations

- Do not keep asylum-seekers at the reception facility in Humenné beyond the time needed to carry out health and other required checks. People should not stay for longer than 30 days. Once health checks are carried out, the Migration Office should prevent them from any exposure to subsequent disease transmission by new arrivals.

- Change the legislation on the mandatory stay for medical checks at the centre in Humenné to allow for justified exceptions, such as when people have a medical certificate of good health, etc.

- Ensure that unaccompanied minors seeking asylum are allowed to stay in the appropriate institutional care instead of an asylum centre. This will require an agreement on legislation and resources among various authorities. Assign at least two people full time to the guardianship care for unaccompanied minors in the facility in Horné Orechové.

- Address the presence of organized smugglers or traffickers in the vicinity of the children`s home in Horné Orechové through concerted action by the competent departments of the Ministry of Interior.

- Facilitate interpreting services for asylum-seekers during their visits to health facilities.

- Increase the use of professional interpreters (instead of other asylum-seekers) by lawyers providing legal assistance.

- Establish minimum standards of housing and support for all beneficiaries of international protection while allowing for individualized support or specific cases.

- Inform employers of the legal rights of people with subsidiary protection. This could be done in the form of information sheets to be developed by government offices and NGOs.

- Initiate legislative changes to allow the extension of subsidiary protection status for terms longer than one year, alongside extending the validity of identity documents for people with such status.

- Initiate a legislative amendment to the Foreigners Act to allow subsidiary protection holders to apply for permanent residence after a certain period. Such a change would bring the laws in line with the extended scope of the EU Directive 2003/109/EC on third country nationals with long-term residence, now including beneficiaries of subsidiary protection.

- Initiate high-level inter-ministerial meetings to address gaps in the health care available to people with subsidiary protection. A long-term solution, so far blocked by the Ministry of Health, would be to include all categories of people (pursuant to Act No. 480/2002 Coll. on asylum) into the system of general health insurance and transfer their healthcare funding to the Ministry of Health.

- Conclude rental contracts for apartments in the residence in Vodárenská Street 14 in Kosice (eastern Slovakia) for a longer duration than the current three months (or one month for bad payers). Six or twelve month contracts would address the feelings of insecurity expressed by recognized refugees.

- Move families with children living on the ground floor of the residence in Vodárenská Street 14 in Kosice to vacant apartments on the upper floors, which are warmer during winter.

- Convince the municipality of Kosice to create a pedestrian crossing for the residents in the flats in Vodárenská Street 14 in front of the building to increase the mobility of disabled or elderly refugees and families with little children. This has since been carried out in 2011.

Statistics

In 2010, Slovakia saw a decline in asylum applications continuing a trend over the past few years. In 2010, just 541 claims were lodged representing a 34 per cent drop from the previous year when 822 applications were filed. In 2008, 910 asylum claims were filed. The major countries of origin of aslyum-seekers were Afghanistan, the Russian Federation and Georgia.

In 2010, 15 people were granted refugee status in Slovakia. In 2009, 14 people received refugees status compared to 22 in 2008. Fifty-five people received subsidiary protection status in 2010, which is a drop of 43 per cent compared to 2009 when 97 people received this form of protection.

© UNHCR/ B. Peterlin

Slovenia

Slovenia has a small population of recognized refugees and other beneficiaries of international protection coming mainly from the former Yugoslav Republics and a variety of countries in Africa, Asia and the Middle East. The number of asylum-seekers is also low with just 211 new applications in 2010. With little tradition of accepting migrants from other parts of the world, the integration of persecuted people is a challenge for both refugees and the host population in Slovenia.

Through the participatory assessment process, the team behind this report found that most refugees appreciate the living conditions and the education and training opportunities in Slovenia. But some of the refugees do not feel welcome. Other areas of concern are the very slow asylum procedure often taking more than two years to determine refugee claims and the common practice of detaining asylum-seekers.

Methodology

In Slovenia, the Participatory Assessment Report is part of a process that occurs all year round. Findings of the 2010 process were jointly approved by Multi-Functional Teams (MFT) in March 2011. Three MFTs comprised representatives of the Ministry of Interior (MOI, Asylum Home and Integration Section); the NGOs the Peace Institute, the Jesuit Refugee Services (JRS), Pravno Informacijski Centre NVO and Slovenska Filantropija; and from UNHCR's Regional Representation for Central Europe in Budapest.

The participatory assessment in 2010 consisted of two parts: a questionnaire on integration opportunities sent out to beneficiaries of international protection by the MoI and returned to UNHCR; and of interviews with 57 asylum seekers and refugees in Slovenia.

The questionnaires were sent to 50 beneficiaries of international protection in Slovenia, and 22 were returned completed from 15 men and 7 women. The respondents came mainly from Sri Lanka, Serbia, Burundi, Iraq, Iran, Kazakhstan, Macedonia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

For the interviews, questions focused on reception conditions and the local integration process including access to education, health care, social services and employment. However, the interviewees were at liberty to raise and discuss any issue or concern. Asylum-seekers and people with international protection were interviewed separately in the following categories: female and male, families, single men and women, children including unaccompanied and separated children.

The interviews were conducted in the following locations:

- the Asylum Home in the country´s capital Ljubljana;
- the Detention Centre for Foreigners in Postojna, in the south-west of the country;
- the Integration House in Maribor;
- the Offices of Slovenska Filantropija in Ljubljana;
- the homes of refugee families in Kamnik (central Slovenia), Kozina (to the south-west) and Menges (just 15 kms from Ljubljana).

Some asylum-seekers staying at the Asylum Home did not take part in the process, possibly because they had taken part in the previous years but failed to see any improvement in their situation and were still waiting for their decisions.

Integrating step by step

In the participatory assessment, the Multi-Functional Teams (MFT) focused particularly on integration challenges in Slovenia. As for any new arrival to a foreign country, the first step for refugees is to find a place to stay. But social or non-profit housing is not available to refugees and others with international protection in Slovenia. Under current laws and practice, only Slovene citizens are eligible to apply for these flats. UNHCR was informed by some refugees that the Ministry of Interior (MOI) had not helped them in their search for a place to live.

But once people do find a place to stay they receive much needed help to pay the rent. Those interviewed for this study staying in private accommodation reported they received rental subsidies from both the MoI and local government. Where needed, they were also given financial support, including child support. The single female asylum-seekers living in private flats also indicated during interviews that they were satisfied with the conditions of the accommodation and the monthly support of 226 Euros for living expenses. Some women had also found work.

Earning a living

Refugees in Slovenia like anywhere else in the world mostly prefer to earn their own living. When they gain their legal status, they get the right to work. But asylum-seekers in Slovenia are not allowed to work in the first nine months of the procedure while waiting for the outcome of their case. Those in the appeal procedure are not allowed to work at all. Apart from the financial hardships during this period, this restriction imposes on people a long break from the routine of work and denies them the opportunity to develop skills, language and contacts which could help the integration process. People who go every morning to a factory, office or shop will more quickly learn the language and how to handle everyday situations.

Given the link between work and integration, the team behind this report was pleased to see that beneficiaries of international protection can access grants from local authorities which are more broadly available to Slovenians. One family who took part in this study had managed to open a restaurant.

But those refugees who can't find work are excluded from receiving unemployment benefits in Slovenia as they have not had jobs before. This was a source of deep frustration for those refugees affected. Others complained they did not have enough information on how to find work. Despite having the right to work, many of the refugees and others with subsidiary protection in Slovenia who took part in this study were not confident of their prospects in finding stable employment.

Learning the language is the key to integration

Learning the local language is a very important step in the integration process, and refugee experience in Slovenia shows it is feasible. Nineteen out of 22 beneficiaries of international protection who responded to the questionnaire had attended Slovene language classes and believed their skills were sufficient to communicate freely. Some asylum-seekers said they had lost the motivation to learn the Slovene language due to the long refugee determination procedure which left them uncertain about a future life in the country. Even those who said they have acquired good progress with Slovene for everyday situations still reported difficulties accessing higher education.

Slovene classes are provided at the Asylum Home, a reception centre in Ljubljana where the majority of the asylum-seekers live, helping to lay important integration foundations for those later recognized as refugees or given subsidiary protection status. Another positive observation of the living conditions of asylum seekers in Slovenia is the fact that unaccompanied minors receive computer training. This will help them on the job market either in Slovenia or in their countries of origin or previous habitual residence if their claims are rejected.

The Slovene authorities and local NGOs are well aware that people with international protection need more than a place to live and some local language skills to integrate. That is why they design personal integration plans for each individual accepted in Slovenia. Among the 22 people who returned the questionnaire on their integration situation, 18 reported they had individual integration plans.

It is good to feel secure. It would be good to feel welcome too.

The questionnaires unearthed several positive experiences of refugees in Slovenia. The vast majority of respondents (17 out of 22) praised the living conditions and the fact that they were able to preserve and practice their own culture, traditions and religion in this European country. Twenty-one respondents said they felt secure in Slovenia.

> *"We cannot integrate fully as expected from us because – frankly – we do not feel welcome here."*

But in the interviews for this report it was clear that many refugees do not feel welcome. "We cannot integrate fully as expected from us because – frankly – we do not feel welcome here," said Qader Sajadi, 28-year-old single man from Afghanistan. More than one respondent informed the MFT about harassment by the police which included frequent ID and resident permit spot checks leaving refugees feeling fearful and anxious.

Waiting, waiting, waiting

Many refugees in Slovenia have bitter feelings about the asylum-procedure in Slovenia despite the eventual positive outcome because it takes such a long time. Despite the comparatively low number of new applications every year, the Slovenian authorities seem not to come to decisions within the six months provided for by law. Two or more years of waiting for decisions is not an uncommon experience for asylum-seekers. This lengthy procedure appears to affect the mental and physical health of the asylum applicant. "I am going crazy," expressed Milenko Komazec asylum seeker from Kosovo. "I have waited and waited, but I am yet to receive a decision on my asylum application. I do not mind whether it is positive or negative. I just want to move on in my life."

The MFT unanimously agreed that this long period of uncertainty could have a negative impact on the integration process, in cases where international protection is granted. The lack of information provided to the asylum-seekers during the process merely compounds the problem. As Mansour Rabini, an asylum-seeker from Iran asked: "Why do they take so long - more than a year to render a decision? Why don't they inform us of the reasons for the delay? It is so scary to keep on waiting and waiting..."

Asylum-seekers also raised concerns about the quality of interpretation. Many claimed that when they received their negative decisions, they did not recognize the facts about their case as they told it to officials. The MFT believe interpreters should have a more clearly defined role to literally convey everything said by asylum-seekers rather than summarize or add comment. This is particularly important when people are recounting traumatic experiences as to why they left their countries. It is critical interpreters are precise and neutral. The MFT recommends that interpreters in the Slovenian asylum procedure should be trained to provide thorough and literal interpretation. International experience shows that summarizing an applicant's statement can lead to misunderstandings and should be avoided.

Speaking to single women living in private accommodations, the MFT found that gender sensitive interpretation and translation services were insufficient during the asylum procedure. For cultural reasons or for sexual or gender-based violence suffered earlier in their lives, women should have female interpreters facilitating and female officials assessing their asylum cases wherever possible. This will help draw out all relevant facts pertaining to individual cases earlier in the procedure, avoiding even more lengthy appeal procedures in some cases.

> *"Why do they take so long - more than a year to render a decision? Why don't they inform us of the reasons for the delay? It is so scary to keep on waiting and waiting..."*

© UNHCR/ B. Peterlin

Ljubljana´s "Asylum Home" does not always feel like home

At the government-run Asylum Home in Slovenia´s capital Ljubljana, single women reported feeling insecure because of the close proximity of adult men to their rooms. This was particularly felt by those who were victims of domestic violence or human trafficking.

Three mothers from Serbia, Bosnia and Kosovo found the special activities organized by the Asylum Home for them and their children a welcome break from the routine: "We are happy about the extra activities, like trips to the sea side and to museums," one said. Others reported feeling bad about not receiving pocket money which they requested for small personal purchases like little birthday presents for their children.

The four children residing at the centre and interviewed by the MFT generally expressed satisfaction with the living conditions there. They could go to school nearby with transportation provided by the Asylum Home. The parents were happy with the kindergarten inside the Asylum Home, but thought the centre was too noisy for children to sleep after 10pm. The playground made of concrete is not child-friendly and can easily lead to injuries. For that reason, the children are not allowed to play soccer. The MFT recommends these issues be addressed and that genuine consultations with asylum-seekers about the changes that affect them should be carried out by centre management.

Others residing in the Asylum Home expressed frustration about the high costs to convert foreign driver's licences and restrictions on the possibility to work. While the period asylum-seekers must wait to work was reduced from 12 to 9 months in 2010, people are left frustrated by their exclusion from the workforce except for small occasional jobs inside their accommodation.

Residents of the Asylum Home were also concerned about health care. While a nurse is always around to help with small problems, people complained the doctor was not always available when they were sick. Access to specialized medical treatment was also reported to be cumbersome. It was subject to approval by a standing committee composed of Asylum Home management, the nurse, and representatives of the Ministry of Health and NGOs. Most applications were rejected. Despite the prevalence of stress-induced mental problems and depression, no psychotherapy treatment was available.

While the asylum-seekers interviewed appreciated the sports activities organized by the Asylum Home, they felt restricted by the house rules obliging them to report back in the evening. As Petar Zupan, an asylum-seeker from Serbia, said: "I do not understand, why as a grown-up I have to be restricted from being out of the asylum home after 11pm."


© UNHCR/ B. Szandelszky

Waiting for freedom

Elsewhere, other asylum-seekers contend with being detained behind bars for administrative reasons while authorities sort out which European country will determine their refugee claim. Under the Dublin Regulation, EU countries return asylum-seekers to other EU countries where they have already lodged claims. The Slovene authorities do not want people to abscond while the issue is sorted out between the two countries so detain asylum-seekers caught by the Dublin Regulation in the meantime. The process can take weeks and months. This practice is not in accordance with what governments and UNHCR agreed at the agency's Executive Committee (ExCom). The relevant Excom resolution foresees the possibility of detaining asylum seekers only as a last resort and for the shortest possible period of time.

The MFT interviewed single men detained at the Centre for Detention of Foreigners in Postojna, in south-western Slovenia. As in previous visits, several services were in place which improved the conditions under these difficult circumstances. A special room for prayer, a small library with books in different languages, psycho-social counselling by social workers, and the presence of a nurse from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. were some of the positive features. Those waiting for a "Dublin return" received clear information about their rights and obligations. Unfortunately, however, the interpretation services provided did not cover most of the languages represented.

Areas of concern in this facility include the fact that men are not allowed to move freely within the facility, and that they are not allowed to wear their own clothes. These measures make the men feel like convicted criminals instead of asylum-seekers.

Improvements for asylum-seekers and refugees

- In 2010, the period asylum-seekers must wait before entering the labour market was reduced from twelve to nine months. This was one of several changes to Slovenia's International Protection Act, following representations from UNCHR to the Ministry of Interior.

- Another improvement made in the same set of legislative changes was the provision of pocket money to asylum-seekers for small personal expenses.

- The open exchange of views between UNHCR, the Slovenian authorities and NGOs in the participatory assessment process has led to regular improvement of reception conditions in Slovenia over the years. In 2010, for example, residents at Ljubljana's Asylum Home were more satisfied with the social counselling and services to families than in the previous year.

The social workers were found to be paying extra attention to the needs of the most vulnerable including children, unaccompanied minors and single women.

Recommendations for refugee protection

- The current integration plan for individual beneficiaries of international protection should be evaluated and revised to better accommodate the needs of refugees.
- All relevant stakeholders should support and promote self-reliance and self-employment initiatives.
- Beneficiaries of international protection should have access to social/non-profit housing.
- Elderly refugees, particularly those who are not able to earn their living, need to benefit from a support mechanism.
- Instead of reimbursing the cost for health insurance to refugees, it should be paid directly and automatically by the MOI. This would ensure patients with no money can still access health insurance.

Recommendations for the asylum procedure

- The length of time to decide asylum claims should be reduced from two years or more, and brought in line with the International Protection Act 2007 which stipulates claims should be decided within six months of filing the application form.
- Officers dealing with asylum claims should provide as much detailed information as possible to applicants regarding the progress of their applications, including explanation of any delays in the process.
- The interviewer should explain the asylum procedure to the applicant when a claim for international protection is lodged and ensure the applicant understands the importance of the interview and its role in the determination process.
- Provide individual counselling and psychotherapy to victims of trauma and violence from their arrival in the country.
- Asylum-seekers staying in private accommodation should have access to counselling by social workers if needed, as do residents of the Asylum Home.
- Renovate the children´s playground at the Asylum Home in Ljubljana to provide a softer alternative to concrete, thereby avoiding injuries.
- Institute more flexible arrangements at the Asylum Home to the current House Rules regarding going in and out at night for adults.
- Allow detained asylum-seekers to wear their own clothes and to move around freely within the detention facility.
- Provide free access to legal counselling and to an interpreter for all asylum-seekers in detention facilities so they can fully understand their situation and rights.

Statistics

In 2010, 246 people sought asylum in Slovenia including 197 males and 49 females. They were mainly from Turkey, Afghanistan, Bosnia and Hercegovina, and Kosovo. This is slightly higher than the 201 applications lodged in 2009 and 240 claims made in 2008.

Twenty-one people received refugee status in 2010, compared to 16 in 2009 and only two in 2008. Only two people were granted subsidiary protection in 2010.

UNHCR
The UN Refugee Agency

Asylum Systems in Central Europe

www.unhcr-centraleurope.org

October 2011

Bulgaria

UNHCR - Bulgaria
Denkoglu Street 19, 1000 Sofia, Bulgaria

Tel. +359 2 980 2453, Fax: +359 2 980 1639
e-mail: bulso@unhcr.org, www.unhcr.bg

Czech Republic

UNHCR - Czech Republic
Námesti Kinských 6, 150 00 Prague 5, Czech Republic

tel.: +420 257 199 861, fax: +420 257 199 862
e-mail: czepr@unhcr.org, www.unhcr.cz

Hungary

UNHCR – Central Europe
Felvinci út 27., 1022 Budapest, Hungary

tel.: +36 1 336 3060, fax: +36 1 336 3080
e-mail: hunbu@unhcr.org, www.unhcr.hu

Poland

UNHCR - Poland
Al. Szucha 13/15 lok.17, 00-580 Warsaw, Poland

tel.: +48 22 628 69 30, fax: +48 22 625 61 24
e-mail: polwa@unhcr.org, www.unhcr.pl

Romania

UNHCR - Romania
UN House, 48A Primaverii Blvd., sector 1,
011975 Bucharest, Romania

tel.: +40-21-201 78 72, fax: +40-21-210 15 94
e-mail: rombu@unhcr.org, www.unhcr.ro

Slovakia

UNHCR - Slovakia
Štúrova 6, 811 02 Bratislava, Slovakia

tel.: +42 1 52 927 875, fax: +42 1 52 927 878
e-mail: svkbr@unhcr.org, www.unhcr.sk

Slovenia

UNHCR – Central Europe
Felvinci út 27., 1022 Budapest, Hungary

tel.: +36 1 336 3060, fax: +36 1 336 3070
e-mail: hunbu@unhcr.org, www.unhcr.si