



Bulgaria: UNHCR says asylum conditions improved, warns against transfer of vulnerable people

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UNHCR has today updated our guidance on the situation for refugees and asylum-seekers in Bulgaria. UNHCR is lifting the call for the temporary suspension of all Dublin transfers of asylum-seekers to Bulgaria that we made in January this year. However, UNHCR notes that serious gaps in the system still remain, and that there may be reasons not to transfer certain groups or individuals, in particular those with specific needs or vulnerabilities. We encourage states to conduct individual assessments in these cases.

We note the significant efforts by the Bulgarian authorities and their partners to improve living conditions for asylum-seekers and the asylum system over the past three months. Conditions in the centres have improved, particularly in the Harmanli centre a former military base located 50 kilometres from the Turkish border where asylum-seekers were living in tents just four months ago. Today asylum-seekers living in the centres receive daily hot meals, are accommodated in renovated buildings or accommodation in the process of being renovated, with heating, and have access to health care. In addition, with more staff, all asylum-seekers have been registered and progress is being made on asylum decisions.

UNHCR remains concerned about the accommodation and sanitary conditions in two centres in Vrazdebnna and Voenna Rampa both centres are located inside Sofia city. UNHCR is also concerned about the lack of identification, referral and support to individuals with specific needs; the barriers children face in accessing formal education; and the lack of a sustainable integration programme. It is essential that these serious gaps are addressed and that improvements already made are sustained going forward.

UNHCR reiterates our concerns over the measures undertaken by the Bulgarian authorities, first made in November 2013, to restrict access to the territory along the Turkish border. These have resulted in a marked decrease in the number of arrivals since December 2013, and could be preventing people in need of international protection from entering and requesting asylum in Bulgaria. UNHCR is also seriously concerned about reports that individuals who may be in need of international protection have been prevented from reaching or entering Bulgarian territory or have been forcibly returned from Bulgarian territory without being able to apply for international protection. In some cases these "push-backs" have resulted in family separations. UNHCR has

received several reports of these alleged "push-backs" from Bulgaria concerning nationals of Syria, Afghanistan and Sudan, as well as Palestinians from Syria.

In 2013, 7,144 people sought asylum in Bulgaria, most of them from Syria. This is an increase from an annual average of 1,000 asylum-seekers over the past decade. The recent influx created significant pressure on an ill-prepared reception and asylum system. Currently Bulgaria is hosting some 5,500 asylum-seekers. About 63 percent are from Syria, with approximately 2,000 people from Afghanistan.

UNHCR remains committed to working closely with the Bulgarian authorities, and other partners to address existing gaps and to continue the consolidation of the progress achieved. We will continue to monitor the situation closely. Improvements have been made possible through the support and assistance of the Bulgarian authorities, UNHCR, the European Asylum Support Office, the EU Commission, member states and civil society.

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