MOLDAVIEN (86)

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Global IDP DATABASE

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PROFILE OF INTERNAL DISPLACEMENT : REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA

Compilation of the information available in the Global IDP Database of the Norwegian Refugee Council

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COUNTRY PROFILE

Republic of Moldova: Uncertainty about the integration of displaced from the Transdniestrian region

Following its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, Moldova - one of the poorest countries in Europe - faced its own internal secessionist uprising as the Russian and Ukrainian population in the Transdniestrian region sort independence. The armed conflict internally displaced up to 51,000 people and forced up to 80,000 people to seek refuge in third countries, mainly in neighbouring Ukraine. A ceasefire signed in July 1992 enabled large numbers of the IDPs and most refugees to return home, although the hostility of the secessionist regime in the Transdniestrian region towards those who do not support its separatist line has endangered the integration of returnees. According to governmental sources, up to 25,000 IDPs were still displaced from the Transdniestrian region in 2003, although authorities have been unable to document this figure. In contrast, there were only 1,000 IDPs of concern to UNHCR at the end of 2002. It is unknown whether those who have not returned to the Transdniestrian region have voluntary resettled durably in Moldova proper or whether they still have the intention to return. The Moldovan government needs to make a proper assessment of the situation of those displaced from the Transdniestrian region, in particular with regard to their preferred solution. The Transdniestrian authorities, for their part, must uphold the right of IDPs to return by ending all discrimination against the Moldovan community and providing conditions of safety and dignity to returnees.

The conflict and the displacement crisis

Until August 1991 Moldova was part of the Soviet Union. The majority of Moldova's population (65 percent) is made up of Romanian-speaking ethnic Moldovans, although it also has a significant Slavic-Russian speaking minority (26 percent). The latter group includes mainly ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, who together constitute the majority in the Transdniestrian region which is located on the eastern bank of the Dniester river along the border with Ukraine. Ethnic Moldovans, however, are in fact the largest single group in this area, making up 40 percent of the population. (U.S. DOS 25 February 2004, CSCE 10 June 1994).

The loosening of Moscow's political control during the Perestroika era in the late 1980s paved the way for the nationalist aspirations of the ethnic Moldovan population, in terms of cultural and linguistic rights, independence, and for some nationalist groups, reunification with Romania. A new language law, adopted in 1989, proclaimed Moldovan the new state language in the Moldovan Soviet Republic, although Russian was retained as the official language for inter-ethnic communication. The non-ethnic Moldovan population, which suddenly found itself in an environment politically dominated by the Moldovan majority, resisted the implementation of the new law, particularly in the Transdnietrian region. The development of a "reactive nationalism" among the minorities led to the secession of the Transdniestrian region from Moldova in September 1990, with the support of the Soviet 14th Army stationed in Transdniestria (Neukirch 2001).

Skirmishes were reported in the course of 1991 between Moldovan and Transdniestrian armed forces and paramilitary groups. In March 1992, the Moldovan government launched a major military offensive to regain control of the Transdniestrian region but it met with serious resistance from local armed forces. Following the intervention of the 14th Army, a ceasefire was signed in Moscow in July 1992. In total, the armed confrontation displaced some 130,000 persons, 51,000 of them within Moldova. About 80 percent of the internally displaced persons were ethnic Moldovans, and 15 percent were Russians or Ukrainians (IOM 1997).

The ceasefire agreement consolidated the de facto existence of an autonomous Transdniestrian region with the establishment of a security zone between the two parties which was enforced by a tripartite

peacekeeping force, comprising Moldovan, Transdniestrian and Russian units. The "Moldovan Transdniestrian Republic" controls 14 percent of Moldova's territory and between 600,000 and 750,000 inhabitants (of 4.3 million) but is not recognized by any other country (U.S. DOS 25 February 2004, ICG 12 August 2003).

Return and resettlement

The ceasefire agreement provided for both parties to the conflict to open negotiations on the return of the displaced population. Despite the absence of any formal agreement on this issue so far, most of the displaced people (including refugees) have gone back to their homes. Freedom of movement between Moldova and Transdniestria has been restored, although vehicles and goods circulating across the ceasefire line may be subjected to controls by Transdniestrian authorities (U.S. DOS 25 February 2004).

However, several thousands IDPs have not been unable to return, while others have been victims of forced displacement from the Transdniestrian region which has taken since the conflict ended. There were reports of a number of returnees and residents leaving the Transdniestrian region, as a result of the hostile environment imposed by the Transdniestrian regime (Nantoi 1999, UNHCR 1999). According to governmental sources, a total of 25,000 people could still be displaced from the Transdniestrian region in 2003, including soldiers involved in the conflict in 1992; people who left the Transdniestrian region for political reasons; and families whose houses have been destroyed. However, the Moldovan government has no detailed data regarding the intention of the people displaced from the Transdniestrian region to return home or resettle durably in Moldova proper. Furthermore, only 1,000 displaced people were of concern to UNHCR in Moldova as of December 2002, suggesting that the majority of IDPs were able to integrate in Moldova proper (UNHCR 4 August 2003).

Conditions in return areas

The absence of an amnesty for those involved in the 1992 conflict on the side of the Moldovan forces has been one major obstacle to return as the law in the Transdniestrian region permits the death penalty to be used against those who took up arms against the secessionist authorities. Although there have been no cases of executions reported so far, several IDPs have been arrested by the Transdniestrian authorities as they attempted to return (UN in Moldova December 2000). Return has also been hampered by the occupation or deprivation of properties or occupancy rights by the Transdniestrian authorities, who have reallocated "abandoned" properties or apartments to newly arrived Russian citizens (Nantoi 1999).

The Transdniestrian authorities have also been extremely reluctant to respect the right to education for the ethnic Moldovan population. Only six schools in the Transdniestrian region (in Tiraspol, Rybnita, Dubasari, Corjevo, Rogi and Bender) teach in the Moldovan language, using the Latin alphabet. These schools are doing so despite years of intimidation and threats against Moldovan teachers who are not using the Cyrillic alphabet (Nantoi 1999, U.S. DOS 25 February 2004). In 2002, Transdniestrian authorities shut down a school in Griporiopol for clandestinely using the Latin script, requiring children to commute to schools in government-controlled villages (Andrisek and Grecu 2003). Because of the political hostility towards them, the six schools using the Latin script are denied public funding by the Transdniestrian authorities and have to function under difficult circumstances. In Tiraspol, nearly 800 pupils share only nine classrooms in three shifts. UNHCR procured furniture for the schools teaching Moldovan in the Transdniestrian region, but ceased to provide further support in 2002. The OSCE Mission to Moldova and the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities continue to advocate on behalf of the education and language rights of the Moldovan population with the Transdniestrian authorities (Andrysek and Grecu 2003, UNHCR 21 October 2002).

The Transdniestrian regime has severely restricted the opportunities for political opposition, in particular regarding its separatist policy. Strict censorship has been imposed on the media, and political opponents risk arbitrary detention, torture, unfair trial, and dismissal from employment. Also, residents in the Transdniestrian region have been forbidden to take part in elections in Moldova proper (IHF 24 June 2003,

2002). In a survey sponsored by UNHCR in 2000, interviewed IDPs mentioned threats from the Transdniestrian administration and the impossibility of finding a job as reasons for them not to return (For Confidence Building Association 2000).

Another impediment to return has been the military service imposed on the male residents in the Transdniestrian region, despite the absence of any constitutional status of the Transdniestrian forces. There have been cases of draft evaders who were forcefully returned by the Moldovan authorities after leaving the Transdniestrian region (Nantoi 1999).

National support to integration

Most IDPs who did not return after the cessation of armed hostilities, have been left with no other option but to settle in Moldova proper. The Moldovan government adopted various measures to facilitate their integration. Accommodation was provided to displaced households, with priority being given to combatants and political activists. IDPs also got their resident status legalized and received some material help. This assistance was, however, seriously constrained by the State's limited financial capacity and bureaucratic barriers (UNHCR 30 June 1999).

Indeed, economic and social conditions in Moldova have been far from favourable to the integration of IDPs. Moldova is among the poorest countries in Europe with approximately 55 per cent of all Moldovans live below an absolute poverty line of US$2.15 per day (IFRC 2004). It is estimated that over 500,000 Moldovan citizens, that is one person in every three households, work abroad, mainly in the Russian Federation and western and central European countries (IOM 2002).

Most measures taken by the Moldovan authorities on behalf of IDPs targeted households displaced before or during the 1992 armed conflict, while persons displaced after the ceasefire have been largely ignored. The state committee created in 1992 to deal with the IDP crisis (The "Commission for the Liquidation of the Consequences of the Armed Conflict in Transdniestria") was dissolved in 1995. There has also been no legal framework providing for the protection of IDPs, and no plan for emergency preparedness in case of new displacement crises.

In an apparent move to devote more systematic attention to the remaining IDPs, the Moldovan authorities designated a focal point on IDPs within the Ministry for Reintegration in December 2002. This Ministry is mandated with issues relating to the Transdniestrian conflict (UNHCR 13 August 2003). The return of displaced people to their homes in the Transdniestrian region has still not been addressed in the negotiations between Moldova and Transdniestrian authorities (UNHCR 29 May 2002).

Internally displaced people have made attempts to organise themselves in order to cope with the low level of assistance provided by the authorities. For instance, the Society for Refugees provides legal counselling to IDPs in collaboration with the Movement of Transdniestrian Refugees, an association of internally displaced people in Moldova (UNHCR/ICS 2002). In 2000, another movement, the Confederation of IDPs, representing ten different organizations and over 10,000 individuals, was reportedly dealing only with a limited scope of subjects and was plagued by infighting (UN in Moldova December 2000).

The international response

UNHCR has been the most active international agency in providing assistance and protection to internally displaced people in Moldova. However, because of the limited donor support, it has only been able to implement a very small number of activities to support the return of IDPs. These included the reconstruction of an abandoned apartment block for twelve IDP families in Chisinau, and the rehabilitation of hospitals and educational facilities in areas affected by the 1992 conflict, partially in cooperation with the World Bank (UNHCR June 2002).

Since 1993, the mandate of the OSCE mission in Moldova has been to facilitate the resolution of the conflict with the Transdniestrian region. This includes the provision of expertise on human and minority rights, democratic transformation and the repatriation of refugees. Despite numerous meetings and proposals, negotiations on the status of the Transdniestrian region with Moldova has failed to produce any significant result (Neukirch 2001). Another round of negotiations (the "Chisinau round") initiated in 2002 did not succeed in bringing both parties to an agreement on their mutual relations (ICG 12 August 2003). In February 2003, Moldovan President Voronin proposed to Transdniestrian authorities "to become a participant and co-author of the new Constitution of the Republic of Moldova". This led to the creation of the Joint Constitutional Commission which was formed in April 2003. It has not managed to reach any agreement on state structures and other sensitive issues such as citizenship and education (Neukirch 2003).

The Transdniestrian authorities have consistently opposed any settlement with Moldova. The status quo has contributed to the consolidation of economic interests among Transdniestrian ruling groups, which include the development of illegal trafficking activities across the open "border" with Moldova (ICG 12 August 2003, Neukirch 2001). There has also been persistent resistance in Moldova proper to a political settlement with the Transdniestrian region, as the idea of a federal state has been rejected by opposition forces and large parts of civil society (Neukirch 2003).

The OSCE Mission in Moldova has also been given the mandate to monitor and facilitate the removal of the Russian troops and military equipment, pursuant to decisions taken by the OSCE Summit in Istanbul in 1999. Observers say this process has been seen as an essential step towards the settlement of the Transdniestrian dispute. However, more than 1,200 Russian troops from the former 14th Army (renamed the Operation Group of Russian Forces) and 26,000 tons of ammunitions were still in Moldova at end of 2003. (ICG 12 August 2003, Neukirch 2003)

(Updated March 2004)

ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

IDP	Internally Displaced Person
OSCE	Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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