

Asylum surge expected in ill-equipped Croatia

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By Nikolaj Nielsen

BRUSSELS - An anticipated rise in asylum seekers is expected in an ill-equipped Croatia after it becomes the EU's newest member state as of 1 July.

US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) says Croatia's reception centres are already overcrowded with hundreds of unaccompanied children in need of specialised protection standards.

"Zagreb should see the accession as an incentive to further improve rights protection, rather than a signal to slow down," said Hugh Williamson, HRW Europe and Central Asia director on Friday (28 June).

The Brussels-based Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) drew similar conclusions in a study out this week.

The group found Croatian centres are under an additional strain because of a dysfunctional asylum system in Macedonia.

"What happens in one country in the Balkans has consequences for the region," said JRS Europe senior policy chief Stefan Kessler at a press event in Brussels on Wednesday.

Deplorable conditions and violence at Skopje reception centres are forcing arrivals to seek protection elsewhere. Macedonia has not granted anyone asylum since 2011.

JRS says hundreds of so-called forced migrants are using the remote Macedonian village of Lojane as a staging point for a perilous journey by foot across snow-capped mountains into Serbia as they head on to Hungary, Slovenia or Croatia.

Unlike asylum seekers and refugees, forced migrants are remnants of the some 300,000 people displaced internally in the wake of the 1990s Yugoslav wars.

More than 200,000 remain in limbo, with some 100,000 in Bosnia alone, says the UN agency for refugees.

Many have opted to transit in Macedonia with Croatia set to become a new pull factor as it joins the EU.

Meanwhile, the number of detected irregular border crossings into Croatia doubled from 2,193 in 2011 to 5,066 in 2012, says the UN. The EU as a whole reported 13,600 irregular crossings in the last three months of 2012.

The European Commission, for its part, says Croatia has met EU asylum standards but recognizes some areas could be improved.

"We first need to monitor it should the numbers increase," said a European Commission policy officer from DG home affairs, present at the JRS press event.

She noted Croatia has access to financial support from EU funds should it run into trouble as well as additional aid from Frontex, the European Asylum Support Office or the EU police agency Europol. Member states may also voluntarily take in extra asylum seekers from Croatia should the need arise, she says.

But JRS says conditions at asylum centres in Croatia are far from satisfactory because they lack staff and funding.

“If Croatia cannot cope with migrants coming through the Balkans, then it will not be able to cope with the raft of EU asylum laws that it will have to adopt as a new member of the EU,” said Kessler.

The European Parliament voted in the common European asylum system package in June.

The package revised a raft of laws aimed to improve member state’s asylum conditions, including the Dublin regulation. The regulation lays out a set of criteria that determine which member state is responsible for processing an applicant’s claim.

In most cases, the member state where the applicant first entered Europe is responsible. If the asylum seeker is apprehended in another member state, then they can be transferred to the member state where they first entered.

Kessler says it is unlikely Croatia’s asylum system in its current state will be able to deal with asylum seekers transferred to it from other EU countries.

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