



HIGHLIGHTS

- Bulgaria is currently hosting 8,424 asylum-seekers and refugees. Most of them applied for asylum in the last 6 months.
- UNHCR is concerned over measures to restrict access to territory, since 1 January 2014 only 132 people crossed into Bulgaria, a total of 99 from Turkey.
- The Bulgarian authorities are now distributing two hot meals a day in all reception centres.
- UNHCR has been working with the Bulgarian authorities to improve reception conditions. While living conditions continue to improve, they remain inadequate in most centres.
- There are improvements in the pre-registration of asylum-seekers, but delays remain in registration and access to registration cards – which provide access to rights and financial assistance.
- UNHCR will continue to work closely with the Bulgarian Government, European Asylum Support Office (EASO), civil society, and other stakeholders to further improve reception conditions, access to services and to ensure that asylum-seekers have access to the territory and to fair and effective asylum procedures.

CURRENT SITUATION IN BULGARIA

According to the State Refugee Agency (SAR), Bulgaria is currently hosting 8,424 asylum-seekers, including 4,556 in seven accommodation centres and 3,868 living at their own expenses at external addresses. Some refugees who have been granted status remain in the reception centres as they lack the means to live independently. In addition, there have been delays in the provision of the monthly allowance of 65 BGN (€33), as the 2014 budget for SAR has not been adopted yet.

The Bulgarian authorities are taking steps to address some of the identified gaps, particularly in relation to registration, improving reception conditions, and provision of basic services. While living conditions continue to improve, reception conditions remain inadequate in some centres. Conditions have considerably improved in Harmanli, but they remain inadequate in the other locations, particularly Voenna Rampa and Vrazdebna. As there is no integration plan in place, newly recognized refugees and persons granted humanitarian status are not receiving financial aid nor support for housing or language courses. As a result recognized refugees have remained in reception centres for asylum-seekers, which continue to be overcrowded.

UNHCR remains concerned about the measures taken by the Bulgarian government to restrict access to Bulgarian territory. The number of arrivals has been significantly reduced. According to the Ministry of Interior, there have been 132 irregular crossings into Bulgaria (99 at the Bulgarian-Turkish border) since 1 January 2014. The authorities have placed an additional force of 1,500 police officers at the border since November 2013. The 33km fence, which is being built along a section of the 274km land border between Turkey and Bulgaria, is expected to be completed by mid-March 2014. UNHCR has received information about families who are separated and are unable to reunite because of these measures.

UNHCR ASSESSMENT AND RESPONSE

UNHCR continues to work closely with the Bulgarian Government, EASO as well as NGOs and civil society, to further improve reception conditions, access to services and to ensure that asylum-seekers have access to the territory and to fair and effective asylum procedures.

The authorities with the support of EASO have pre-registered most asylum-seekers. However, “pre-registration” cards do not provide access to rights. With the increase in SAR’s staff as of December and the provision of additional equipment, registration is now taking place in all centres. While the number of asylum-seekers issued with status determination decisions has significantly increased there have been recent protests from asylum-seekers over delays in obtaining registration cards and the need to accelerate the asylum process. Many asylum-seekers who arrived in Bulgaria 3 or 4 months ago are still waiting for registration cards, which entitle them to monthly financial assistance and access to health services. In addition, UNHCR is working with SAR and EASO to address challenges related to privacy and confidentiality when conducting interviews, appropriate interpretation and credible assessment of the asylum claims.

Improvements of reception conditions continue, although conditions in the seven centres vary. Hygienic and accommodation conditions in parts of Voenna Rampa remain dire and need urgent attention. Many centres are still overcrowded. The authorities are planning further renovations in Harmanli, Voenna Rampa, and Vrajdebna. In Harmanli, renovation work is under way and the first stage of the renovation process should end by 15 February. It is expected that renovations in Vrajdebna will be finished by the end of April.



UNHCR stopped its food programme in three centres as SAR, in coordination with the Ministry of Defense, which began distributing two hot meals a day in all centres on 1 February. In Harmanli, Voenna Rampa and Vrazhdebna, Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) continues to provide medical care pending the assumption of these responsibilities by the Government. MSF will be leaving in March. In addition, the authorities will need to set up a medical referral mechanism in line with the national legal and administrative requirements.

Access to formal education remains a serious gap. While guaranteed by the State, in practice children may only attend school once they have a sufficient command of Bulgarian - checked by a panel of the Ministry of Education. Up to December 2013, language courses were available in Sofia for those who had received humanitarian or refugee status. The impact of this is that no asylum-seeking children have access to formal education. UNHCR is finalizing its discussions with CARITAS to ensure that informal Bulgarian language courses for both adults and children are provided in all centres for asylum-seekers, refugees as well as humanitarian status holders. UNHCR is also concerned over the lack of specific measures to protect separated and unaccompanied children and is working with relevant stakeholders to find adequate solutions. UNICEF is working with UNHCR in relation to the situation of separated and unaccompanied children, in addition to providing kindergarten and school in a box kits for all centres.