



HIGHLIGHTS

- Bulgaria is currently hosting over 9,300 asylum-seekers and refugees.
- UNHCR is urging States participating in the Dublin Regulation to temporarily suspend transfers of asylum-seekers back to Bulgaria.
- Arrivals at the border have been reduced significantly, since 1 January 2014 only 32 people crossed into Bulgaria from Turkey.
- UNHCR is providing one hot meal a day for all asylum-seekers accommodated in Harmanli, Pastrogor, Banya, and Kovachevtsi until the end of January 2014, when the government will take over food distribution in all of the centres.
- The authorities have made significant progress in the registration of asylum-seekers.
- While living conditions continue to improve, reception conditions remain inadequate. Asylum-seekers living in tents have been moved into buildings, heating is available in all reception centres and UNHCR is working with the authorities to install kitchens, dining rooms and laundry facilities in several centres.

CURRENT SITUATION IN BULGARIA

Bulgaria is currently hosting 9,386 asylum-seekers, according to the State Refugee Agency (SAR), 4,725 in seven reception centres, and 4,569 living externally at their own expense. Preliminary statistics for 2013 show that over the course of the year a total of 6,600 Syrians and 2,000 Afghans entered Bulgaria and the majority have applied for asylum.

The number of arrivals has been significantly reduced, from a daily arrival of 100 people a day in October/November to 32 in the first weeks of the year. The authorities have placed an additional force of 1,500 police officers at the border since November. 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.

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. However, the reception centres are currently working above capacity and reception conditions remain inadequate. All asylum-seekers who were living in tents have been relocated to buildings and heating is working in all centres.

UNHCR remains concerned over xenophobic violence and rhetoric impacting asylum-seekers and refugees. FOCUS News Agency commissioned a national survey from Exacta Research Group, carried out from 5th to 13th December among 1,000 adult Bulgarians in 86 cities of the country. Intolerance towards refugees increases when it comes to assessing whether people want to live in proximity to refugees. For example, 73 % of people do not want refugees in their village; whereas 59% of adult Bulgarians said they

were strongly opposed refugees to live in Bulgaria. On a positive side, 41% of respondents said they did not mind refugees living in Bulgaria.

UNHCR RESPONSE

UNHCR issued a position paper urging EU Member States participating in the Dublin Regulation to temporarily halt transfers of asylum-seekers back to Bulgaria. The paper concludes that asylum-seekers in Bulgaria face a genuine risk of inhuman or degrading treatment due to systemic deficiencies in reception conditions and asylum procedures. UNHCR's assessment shows that asylum-seekers lack access to basic needs, such as food and healthcare; face lengthy delays in registration which subsequently deprive them of their basic rights; and are at risk of arbitrary detention. In addition, there are serious challenges to access fair and effective asylum procedures, alongside ongoing reports of push-backs at the border. UNHCR will re-assess the situation as of 1 April 2014.

UNHCR continues to provide assistance in reception centres. UNHCR is providing one hot meal a day in Harmanli, Pastrogor, Banya, and Kovachevtsi until the end of January when the government will take over food distribution in all of the centres. UNHCR is also working on construction or reconstruction of kitchens, dining rooms and laundry facilities in Harmanli, Vrazhdebna and Voenna Rampa, together with the authorities.



UNHCR continues to work with the Bulgarian authorities on cooperation and coordination issues. Weekly coordination meetings are ongoing. The authorities have also established a Camp Management and Coordination Working Group, focusing on current activities and plans for accommodation, reconstruction and food supply in all the reception centres. In addition, a working group on Mass Information and Communications has been established, chaired by UNHCR. Its main focus will be the provision of information to asylum-seekers and refugees in all reception centres.

To address challenges in registration and status determination SAR is expanding its staff. The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) and UNHCR are providing training to newly recruited SAR staff. Progress has been made in addressing the backlog of registration of asylum-seekers and registration is now ongoing in Harmanli closed reception centre as SAR has dispatched teams there.

Child-friendly spaces have been established in two of the seven centres and in Harmanli, and there are plans to create an accommodation area for single women in the newly reconstructed accommodation block. A community services system to identify the most vulnerable refugees and asylum-seekers is being put in place by UNHCR and NGO partners. In addition, as part of the urban outreach programme for the nearly 5,000 asylum-seekers and refugees living in the greater area of Sofia, UNHCR has started identifying suitable locations for an Information Centre. This centre will be used by UNHCR and its partners to provide protection counseling and interventions, to make referrals and to assist in accessing rights.