

# Regional Bureau for Europe

## UPDATE # 16

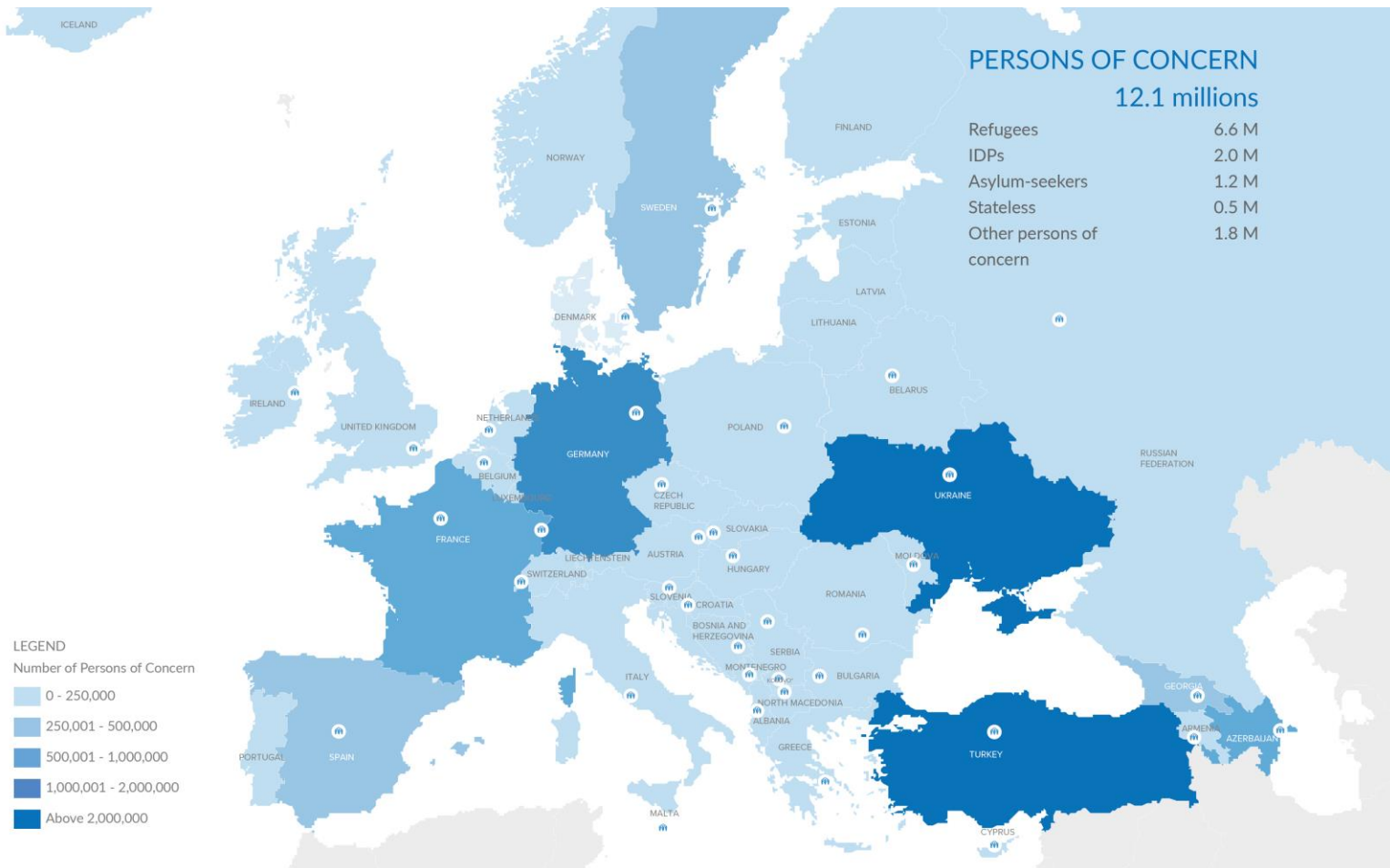
19 - 31 August 2020

As COVID-19 infection rates increase again across the region, many countries have reacted by reinstating some **movement limitations** as well as **targeted travel restrictions**.

UNHCR staff across Europe has gradually moved back to working in office premises. 36 offices are now **partially teleworking**, while 1 remains on **full teleworking mode** as of 31 August.

**UNHCR and partners' physical access to persons of concern** has improved compared to the onset of the pandemic, in compliance with COVID-19 preventive measures.

## Populations of Concern



SOURCE: [UNHCR GLOBAL REPORT 2019](#)

*Includes Serbia and Kosovo (S/RES/1244 (1999)). The boundaries and names shown, and the designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement or acceptance by the United Nations.*

## Operational Context

- All 49 countries and one territory in the region have reported COVID-19 cases among the general population. To date, 33 countries have reported cases among persons of concern at some point, and some of the concerned individuals have already recovered. However, any figures or estimates need to be taken with caution due to varying approaches to testing, data segregation and reporting.
- Countries across the region are reacting to overall increasing COVID-19 infection rates with new restrictions to movement in the form of travel recommendations, mandatory quarantine upon arrival from high-risk areas or requirements to present negative COVID-19 tests. Only one country has reintroduced full border restrictions, similar to the ones observed at the onset of the pandemic. This may affect access to territory and asylum for people in need of international protection. More details on UNHCR's interactive COVID-19 platform on temporary measures and the impact on protection are available [here](#).
- In **Greece**, UNHCR issued a [press release](#) on 21 August reiterating its concerns over credible pushback reports indicating that men, women and children may have been returned to Turkey after reaching Greek soil or territorial waters. UNHCR repeated its call for protection of refugees and asylum-seekers. [UNHCR Assistant High Commissioners for Protection and Operations were to travel to Greece from 1 to 4 September](#).
- In **Spain**, UNHCR and IOM issued a [joint press release](#) on 29 August expressing concern over the alarming reception conditions in Melilla that have been worsening since the beginning of the pandemic. The centre currently hosts some 1,400 persons, over twice its capacity. Tensions mounted after the detection of a small number of COVID-19 cases and the consequent decision to place the entire centre under lockdown quarantine. The decision was later reversed by the competent judge. UNHCR and IOM call on the authorities for urgent tangible and coordinated actions to improve reception conditions in Melilla and to streamline transfers of asylum-seekers to the mainland.
- Country offices in the region are gradually resuming suspended activities, including protection monitoring at borders. As of 31 August, 36 offices in the region were partially teleworking, while one office remains in full telework mode. Field and on-site visits to reception centres have also gradually resumed.

## UNHCR Response

- UNHCR's response to the COVID-19 situation is focused on:
  - Continuing to **provide protection assistance**, including legal aid, support to registration, documentation, refugee status determination, protection counselling, prevention and response to gender-based violence, as well as child protection services.
  - Supporting national authorities in setting up **preparedness and response plans**, including improving access to water and sanitation where possible and enhancing reception capacity post disembarkation by establishing quarantine and isolation areas in reception centres to better monitor and isolate, as necessary, confirmed or suspected COVID-19 cases;
  - Enhancing national and community-based **communication platforms** to interact with refugees and displaced communities and transmit quality information on hygiene, access to health care and other essential measures in a culturally appropriate manner and in relevant languages;
  - Supporting authorities, in some operations, in identifying alternative **accommodation** or bringing current housing for asylum-seekers up to acceptable protection and hygienic standards;
  - **Ensuring the inclusion** of persons of concern, host communities and service providers in the provision and distribution of adequate hygienic items;
  - **Continuous advocacy** to ensure the inclusion of persons of concern in national COVID-19 preparedness and response plans;
  - **Additional one-off cash distributions** to persons of concern, to allow them to cope with the adverse economic impact of COVID-19 and related measures on their livelihoods and self-reliance.

## UNHCR Areas of Intervention



### PROTECTION

- As broad travel bans were lifted over the summer, access to territory and international protection was generally ensured in the Europe region. With many countries experiencing COVID-19 spikes, varying degrees of movement restrictions and mandatory testing and quarantine measures upon arrival were imposed.
- **Search and rescue:** In the **Mediterranean Sea**, over 400 people were on board three vessels at the end of August, waiting for a port of safety. On 29 August, UNHCR and IOM issued a [press release](#) calling for urgent disembarkation under safe and dignified conditions, after which the most vulnerable were evacuated to Italy. Soon after, most of the rest was allowed to disembark in Italy. Some individuals are still stranded on the merchant vessel Maersk Etienne off the coast of Malta and should urgently be disembarked.
- **Quarantine measures for new arrivals:** **Italy** saw a significant number of new arrivals by sea during the reporting period, the majority disembarking in Lampedusa. All new arrivals have to follow the COVID-19 prevention protocol in place, including a 14-day quarantine either onshore or offshore, on board of one of the two vessels designated for the purpose. Authorities have taken further measures to enhance their capacity to safely test, quarantine and receive new arrivals by seeking an additional offshore vessel, speed up transfers out of the overcrowded Lampedusa hotspot and improve quarantine arrangements. Since starting the mandatory quarantine for sea arrivals on 23 February, 16,224 individuals have been quarantined.
- Quarantine and reception capacities are also strained in the north-east of Italy at the land border with Slovenia. The situation is particularly worrisome due to the high number of unaccompanied and separated children (UASCs), since the local reception system and all ad hoc arrangements have reached full capacity. Local and regional authorities are trying to facilitate the transfer of arrivals to other regions to properly implement quarantine arrangements, especially for UASCs.
- In a welcome step in southern **Spain**, regional and national protocols for testing and COVID-19 prevention upon arrival have been aligned. UNHCR continues to liaise with authorities to find solutions for arrivals until the new protocols are implemented. During the reporting period, over 1,600 individuals have arrived in Spain, mostly by sea, reaching the highest number of arrivals since the beginning of the pandemic.
- **Access to territory:** UNHCR offices in **Central and South Eastern Europe** continue to receive reports about increasing numbers of border crossings in the region but also of deadly incidents along the route as well as pushbacks. UNHCR has in some cases scaled up advocacy efforts to ensure access to territory and asylum procedures for individuals who have expressed their intention to seek asylum. In some countries, local NGOs have reportedly intervened with the Ombudsperson's office and authorities.
- **Mixed movements** continue to pose challenges. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, due to limited accommodation capacity, host communities requested local authorities to take concrete steps to find solutions to the situation related to migrants/refugees. As a worrying result, authorities have introduced a new set of restrictive measures applicable to new arrivals by banning transportation of migrants and asylum-seekers to and through the Una-Sana Canton.
- **Reception conditions:** COVID-19 outbreaks and overcrowding in reception centres are increasingly worrying. Some countries are trying to implement new measures to ensure sufficient space in the reception centres. In **Italy**, for example, where COVID-19 measures earlier this year allowed for people to remain longer in reception facilities regardless of their status, authorities have now mandated residents to conduct swab tests and leave the centres to make space for new arrivals. The authorities further circulated some guidelines from the National Institute for Health, Migration and Poverty on preventing and treating COVID-19 incidences in reception and pre-removal facilities, including on carrying out swab tests, quarantine and isolation arrangements. All asylum-seekers and migrants must hold health documentation reflecting the tests taken.
- **Access to asylum procedures:** In some countries, backlogs related to COVID-19 remain challenging. Offices report difficulties observed in timely assigning of lawyers and scaling up remote interviewing capacity. Where authorities use

remote interviewing as an alternative to physical interviews, UNHCR is advocating to observe the new Refugee Status Determination (RSD) guidelines, including UNHCR [COVID-19 related recommendations and best practices](#).

- In **Cyprus**, the Pournara/Kokkinotrimithia camp remains a closed facility hosting some 420 individuals as of 28 August, including 73 children, with 288 people in quarantine. Reportedly, the time spent in quarantine areas can exceed 20 days due to lack of separate space for arrivals from different dates. The average length of stay in the centre has decreased, however, and asylum-seekers can leave the centre when they present an address to stay. During the reporting period, 309 people arrived in the camp. COVID-19 tests are routinely carried out.
- Some UNHCR operations in the region resumed planned activities applying new modalities to comply with health measures. For example, in the **Czech Republic**, the operation and the Ombudsman office conducted a two-day seminar for RSD caseworkers. In some countries, for example **North Macedonia**, the Skopje Centre for Refugee Law and Migration, UNHCR and the San Remo International Institute of Humanitarian Law (IIHL) jointly held the first online summer school on refugee rights and migration (24-28 August), focusing on COVID-19-related challenges that have arisen in refugee protection. In **Azerbaijan**, the operation rearranged interviewing spaces, and developed adapted guidelines to allow for resumption of individual case management.
- **Integration measures:** Of concern is the fact that, due to the pandemic and related measures, government-run livelihood support and integration programmes were put on hold or operated at reduced capacity. In **Germany**, for example, the number of participants in integration courses has decreased drastically to 50,000 in 2020 compared to 200,000 in 2019, according to authorities. In **Bulgaria**, UNHCR and partners continue to be in direct contact with employers and persons of concern seeking employment. Information sessions on employment opportunities in the context of COVID-19 are ongoing with refugee job-seekers.
- **Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs):** In **Ukraine**, between 17 and 28 August, 21,758 persons crossed the 'contact line' from the Non-Government Controlled Area (NGCA) to the Government-Controlled Area (GCA) at the **Stanytsia Luhanska** Entry Exit Checkpoint (EECP), some 7,000 more than in the previous fortnight. 21,860 persons crossed from the GCA to NGCA, some 10,000 more than during the last reporting period. This EECP is the only one connecting the GCA to Luhansk NGCA. 5,919 individuals used the two electric cars operated by UNHCR and partner Proliska for people with special needs. The **Novotroitske/Olenivka** checkpoint continued operating twice per week for people on the pre-approved lists prepared by the Donetsk de facto authorities. 490 persons were permitted to cross to the GCA and 832 persons to the NGCA during this period.



#### HEALTH

- In **Greece**, 272 persons of concern have tested positive to COVID-19 as of 28 August. Out of these, 234 are on mainland and 38 are on the islands.
- While movement restrictions for the general population and travellers were lifted, discriminatory movement restrictions on refugee-hosting sites has been extended until 15 September. Given the lack of isolation areas to ensure 14-day quarantine at or next to the Reception and Identification Centres (RICs), the Fylakio RIC in Evros and the Moria RIC on Lesbos were placed under quarantine after COVID-19 positive cases were identified. As a result, new arrivals will remain in substandard locations until the quarantine is lifted.
- On **Lesvos**, infrastructure for medical screenings at the Moria RIC and MSF's quarantine and isolation spaces are expected to be transferred to a plot of land with a field hospital donated by the Dutch Government. In **Leros**, the medical area and an isolation space for new arrivals is almost ready, while in **Kos**, finalization work is ongoing.
- As of 23 August, UNHCR has provided accommodation and protection services for 1,812 asylum-seekers vulnerable to COVID-19 complications. However, island hotels are no longer used for the scheme and UNHCR is now only transferring small numbers to ESTIA apartments or the mainland. To date, 22,870 individuals remain in the RICs. This is less than before the pandemic started but still above the maximum hosting capacity of 5,400 persons. Living conditions remain dire and the provision of medical services inadequate. Organized transfers from **Lesvos** and **Chios** to mainland have also ceased as a result of the growing number of COVID-19 cases among locals and refugees.



### CASH-BASED AND IN-KIND ASSISTANCE

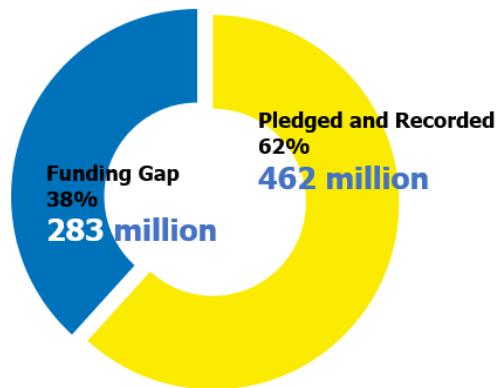
- In **Azerbaijan**, a second cash assistance distribution benefited 317 families selected based on an individual assessment. The distribution started in late August and is expected to be completed by mid-September.
- In **Turkey**, nearly 21,000 families were reached with the first phase of COVID-19 emergency cash-based intervention. Discussions are ongoing with the authorities with a view to continuing this scheme to reach 85,000 households by the end of the year.
- In **Ukraine**, on 20 August, the operation and NGO partner Donbas Development Centre (DDC) delivered desks, chairs and materials to a vocational school in the town of Novoazovsk in Donetsk NGCA. The rehabilitation works that are planned will be implemented by a local community to ensure that classrooms are ready to host children when they return to school. This assistance was provided as part of UNHCR's peaceful coexistence project aimed at supporting educational and medical facilities along the 'contact line'. Similar assistance will be provided to ten educational and medical facilities in conflict-affected locations in the Novoazovsk district.

### Working in partnership

- UNHCR supports governments' efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic through existing coordination mechanisms and by working closely with WHO and other partners. In addition, UNHCR co-chairs the Issue-Based Coalition on Large Movements of People, Displacement and Resilience, steering collective advocacy efforts on COVID-19-related issues affecting persons of concern.
- In **Greece**, UNHCR continues supporting the Government's efforts by enhancing coordination mechanisms in response to the COVID-19 situation, with a focus on the islands, regarding health, clean water and sanitation, as well as Communication with Communities.
- In **Ukraine**, where the humanitarian programme cycle is implemented, the UN Resident Coordinator/Humanitarian Coordinator and the Humanitarian Country Team lead the response, with WHO providing lead expertise on public health issues, in consultation with the authorities.

### Financial Information

- The revised [COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan \(GHRP\)](#) was released on 7 May, covering the period April-December 2020. UNHCR seeks USD 745 million to globally boost preparedness, prevention and response activities to address immediate public health needs of refugees and host communities. The amount presented in the appeal does not represent the magnitude of UNHCR's engagement to support governments' efforts in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, including in Europe.
- UNHCR Regional Bureau for Europe is grateful to donors who have provided generous and timely support to the Coronavirus Emergency Situation globally and to Europe in particular, including for non-COVID-19 related interventions, which are critical to ensure business continuity.

**Requested for UNHCR's COVID-19 response globally until the end of the year:****Total contributed or pledged to UNHCR COVID-19 appeal****USD 462 M (62%)**

Including: United States of America \$186.3M | Germany \$62.7M | European Union \$46.3M | United Kingdom \$31.5M | Japan \$23.9M | African Development Bank \$18.3M | Denmark \$14.6M | United Nations Foundation \$10.0M | Private donors \$8.7M | CERF \$6.9M | Canada \$6.4M | Qatar Charity \$3.5M | Spain \$3.4M | France \$3.4M | Ireland \$3.3M | Sweden \$3.0M | Sony Corporation \$2.9M | Austria \$2.5M | Finland \$2.4M | Unilever \$2.1M | Education Cannot Wait \$1.8M | UNO-Flüchtlingshilfe (Germany) \$1.7M | Norway \$1.4M | USA for UNHCR \$1.0M

**Unearmarked contributions to UNHCR's 2020 programme**

Sweden 76.4M | Norway 41.4M | Netherlands 36.1M | Denmark 34.6M | Private donors Spain 33.1M | United Kingdom 31.7M | Germany 25.9M | Private donors Republic of Korea 17.3M | Switzerland 16.4M | France 14 M | Private Donors Japan 11.7 M

**Useful Links**

[UNHCR's revised Coronavirus Emergency Appeal](#)

[UNHCR operations overview in Europe](#)

[COVID-19: UNHCR's response](#)

To subscribe to the mailing list of UNHCR's Regional Bureau for Europe, please click [here](#).

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