

# Regional Bureau for Europe

## UPDATE # 3

18 - 24 April 2020

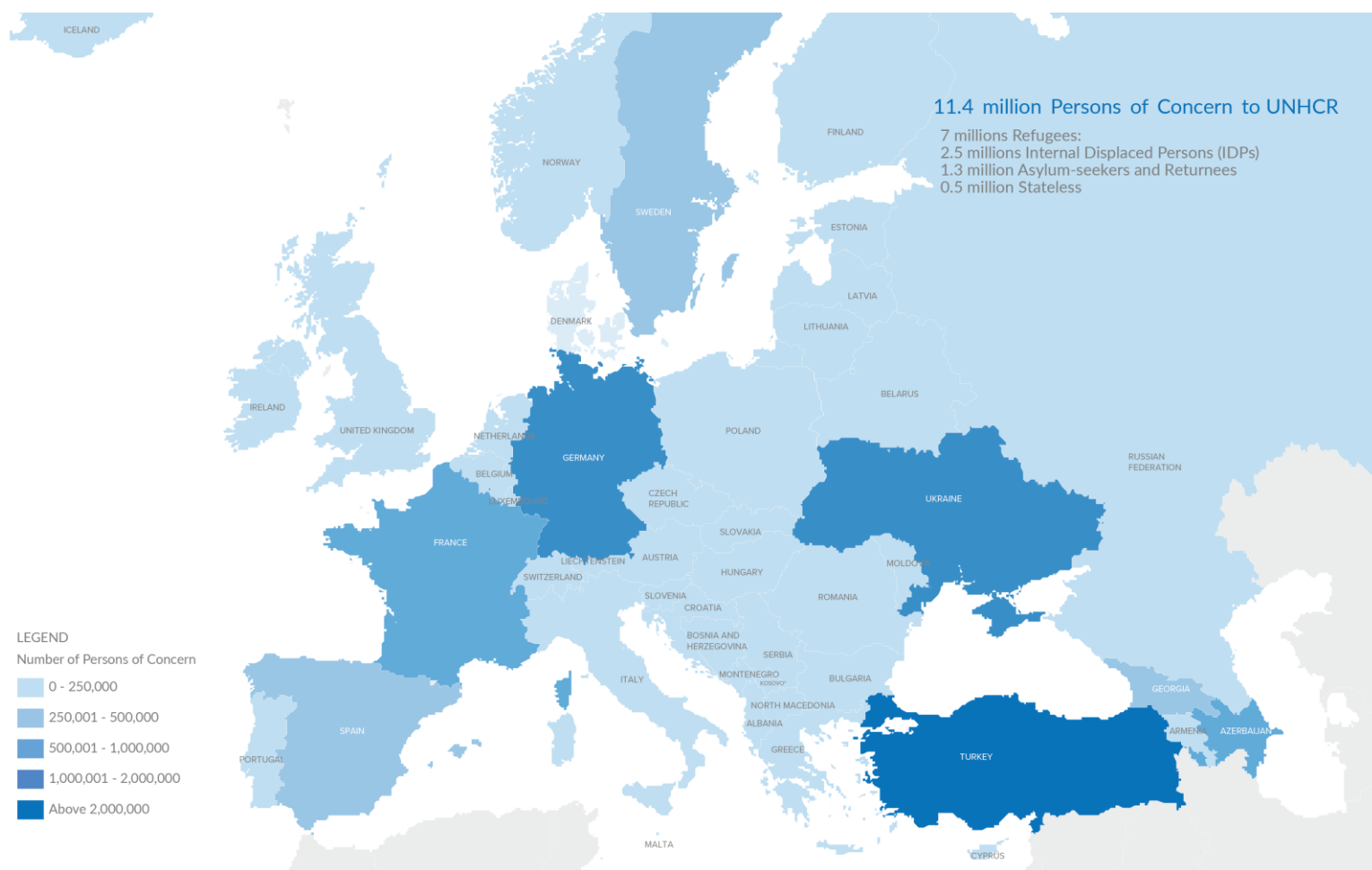
**Movement restrictions** continue to apply to some degree in most countries in the region, including for persons of concern, through restrictions on freedom of movement, curfews and mandatory quarantines.

**Access to territory** is limited through border closures or entry bans for foreigners, with only a few exceptions. In some countries, **asylum procedures** have been suspended, however the majority of European countries have adapted their asylum system to the current situation.

**UNHCR and partners' physical access to persons of concern** has reduced. Communication with communities has been scaled up virtually.

## Populations of Concern

SOURCE: UNHCR STATISTICAL REPORT AS OF END OF JUNE 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. So far, 16 countries have reported cases among persons of concern. However, any figure or estimate at this point needs to be taken with caution due to differing approaches to testing, data segregation and reporting.
- Access to territory remains affected by border management measures related to COVID-19. However, the majority of European countries with border restrictions provide for exemptions to allow entry for persons seeking international protection, either by law or by practice, and many are developing alternatives to face-to-face parts of the procedure, such as online interviews or registration.
- Temporary restrictions on non-essential travel to the European Union (EU) remain in place until 15 May. Some States have started publicly referring to plans of progressive lifting of lockdowns. UNHCR's teleworking arrangements could thus be adapted accordingly, pending public health developments and announcements. Some country offices have started preparing to deliver all capacity-building activities in 2020 virtually.
- The European Parliament issued a resolution for EU-coordinated action to combat COVID-19 after its meeting on 17 April. UNHCR welcomes the resolution, which calls for full respect of the 1951 Convention and European asylum law, and for reception of asylum-seekers in appropriate conditions and with medical support, particularly in Greece. The Parliament also adopted a package of budgetary measures for the COVID-19 response, including EUR 350 million for Greece to address challenges arising from migration.
- The European Council (Heads of State or Government of EU Member States) discussed on 23 April an EU recovery plan and consensus on an Economic Response Package. Ahead of the meeting, several mayors of EU capitals addressed a [letter](#) to EU leaders expressing willingness to accommodate 5,500 unaccompanied refugee children (UAC) from the Greek islands.
- The Council of Europe issued, on 20 April, a [declaration](#) calling on parties to the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence ([Istanbul Convention](#)) to refer to its standards and recommendations as a source of guidance for governmental action during the pandemic. Specific examples focusing on prevention, protection and prosecution, as well as on integrated policies, are included in the annex to the declaration. The Istanbul Convention makes specific reference to [gender-based asylum claims and non-refoulement](#).

## UNHCR Response

- UNHCR's response to the COVID-19 situation is focusing on:
  - Supporting national authorities in setting up [preparedness and response plans](#), including improving access to water and sanitation where possible, and 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;
  - In some operations, supporting authorities in identifying alternative [accommodation](#) or bringing current housing for asylum-seekers up to minimum 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 registered 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

- Across the region, offices are monitoring how to prevent and respond to heightened sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) risks. Movement restrictions and reduced capacity of service providers present added challenges for survivors to report and receive services needed. **France**, for example, has taken steps to address these circumstances and reinforce protection from and prevention of domestic violence. SGBV can be signaled to a 24-hour hotline and to pharmacies. In **Spain**, an extension of the contingency plan against SGBV in the context of COVID-19 adopts additional measures for victims of human trafficking, sexual exploitation and women in sex work, foreseeing an important active role of NGOs in the response.
- Reception conditions for asylum-seekers can remain a challenge in some countries where circumstances do not allow for physical distance and hygiene measures to be fully complied with. Alternatives are sought to accommodate asylum-seekers in hotels or other locations. Some States, like **Slovenia**, have taken mitigating action by releasing people who were waiting for deportation, issuing stay permits that enables them to access financial assistance and basic health services, but not the labour market. Where the lockdown situation in centres is extended, the needs for psychosocial support become very apparent and increasingly crucial to mitigate additional protection risks, as is the case in **Bosnia and Herzegovina**.
- Similarly, in informal settlements, conditions are not favourable to ensure full compliance with distancing requirements. In **Italy**, in Rome's largest informal settlement, some 18 inhabitants were tested positive and were transferred by authorities to appropriate locations for quarantine. A set of recommendations has been shared with the Ministry of Interior.
- Advocacy at country level continued on access to territory, decongestion of reception centres, but also on procedural matters. In the **Netherlands**, for example, given the suspension of procedures and the possibility that children may come of age before resumption, UNHCR is seeking confirmation by authorities to consider the date of registration to determine eligibility for family reunification (rather than a later asylum application date). In other countries, like **Spain**, advocacy efforts were maintained with the competent authorities for transfers to the mainland, in order to decongest the overcrowded reception centre in Melilla. In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, joint advocacy with UNICEF reiterates UNHCR's call to urgently relocate unaccompanied and separated children living in difficult conditions in two overcrowded centres.
- In **Ukraine**, on 15 April, a temporary guidance on remote registration was shared with partners with the aim of adapting registration activities in the context of COVID-19, while taking data protection considerations into account.
- Furthermore, countries that have at least partially suspended administrative procedures are joining other States' practice to extend the validity of documents like asylum-seeker certificates, humanitarian statuses and permissions to stay. Other State practices that are being emulated include permissions for asylum-seekers to apply for seasonal work in agriculture as part of measures to boost the sector for as long as the restrictions are in place, such as in **Cyprus**.
- In some countries, persons of concern have increasingly contacted UNHCR for support and assistance due to the loss of jobs and livelihoods. Complementing delivery of hygienic and medical items, UNHCR is providing one-off cash assistance to cover immediate needs that have arisen due to COVID-19 and related measures, for example in **Georgia**. In places where refugees and stateless persons are included in national assistance programmes, advocacy is being conducted for the inclusion of asylum-seekers and solutions are jointly sought with other stakeholders for exceptional support interventions.

- In **Turkey**, a survey was conducted by phone, reaching out to 1,500 refugees and asylum-seekers in 20 provinces to understand the impact of COVID-19 on their situation. In the outreach, over half of the respondents reported having lost their jobs and the majority of the workplaces where they had been working have closed due to COVID-19. On average, within a household, one member lost a job and one member is currently still working. Close to half of the respondents stated they had to sell household appliances to cope with the economic situation.

**HEALTH**

- In **Greece**, measures are being implemented to protect older and immunocompromised persons of concern medically at risk by moving them to less congested accommodation. As of 23 April, some 755 people had been referred out of island reception and identification centres (RIC) by UNHCR. The introduction of 14-day quarantines for persons referred from islands, regardless of whether they have symptoms or not, will likely slow the referral process down.
- To date, there are no reports of persons of concern testing positive for COVID-19 on the Aegean islands. However, reception conditions remain dire for the 34,200 people living in overcrowded and unhygienic conditions in the RICs, with a hosting capacity of approximately 5,400 persons. The provision of medical services continues to be inadequate. UNHCR supports Greek authorities in establishing health units in all RICs through the provision of technical expertise, establishment of facilities and provision of equipment. Thirteen containers for isolation/triage, as well as 30 WASH set-ups, have been delivered across the islands. Assistance to authorities in the dissemination of messages to the communities continues.
- In **Turkey**, as per presidential decision, all persons, including persons of concern, are exempted from the cost of personal protective equipment (PPE), testing and treatment medication, irrespective of whether they have social security.
- In **Ukraine**, over 10,200 medical masks produced by 14 conflict-affected communities in Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts have reached home-based health care providers in eastern Ukraine. As of 15 April, 50,000 masks had been produced. The operation is supporting refugee women who previously received self-reliance grants with cash for equipment and fabric for sewing medical masks following WHO standards. The masks will be distributed to the residents of the state-run Temporary Accommodation Centres (TACs.) where refugees and asylum-seekers reside. In addition, twelve IDP communities in central, western and southern oblasts self-mobilized to produce masks for the older persons and people with disabilities.
- During the reporting period, 230 litres of sanitizing products have been delivered to first aid points, pharmacies and local community centres in 16 settlements on the government-controlled side of the contact line.

**COMMUNICATION WITH COMMUNITIES**

- As part of the enhancement of communication with communities, some operations are seeking partnerships with the private sector to ensure Wi-Fi coverage of persons in reception centres to which UNHCR and partner access is limited.

## Working in partnership

- UNHCR supports governments' efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic through existing coordination mechanisms and working closely with WHO and other partners. In addition, UNHCR is

active on platforms such as the Issue-Based Coalition on Large Movements of People, Displacement and Resilience, to develop and advance collective advocacy on COVID-19-related issues affecting persons of concern.

- In [Greece](#), the operation continues supporting the Government's efforts by enhancing coordination mechanisms in response to the COVID-19 situation, with a particular 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 authorities.
- In [Turkey](#), UNHCR is also part of the COVID-19 Socio-Economic Impact and Response Task Team that has been established at the request of the UN Turkey Crisis Management Team and in follow-up to guidance by the UN Secretary-General, to assess the economic and social impact of the COVID-19 crisis in Turkey.

## Financial Information

- On 25 March, the UN Secretary-General launched the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan (GHRP), initially covering a period of nine months. UNHCR seeks USD 255 million to globally boost preparedness, prevention and response activities to address immediate public health needs of refugees and host communities. These appeals are currently being revised. 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. This is a fast-moving situation and UNHCR is looking further at reprioritizing certain activities in operations. The full amount of UNHCR's operational engagement will be updated as required, including for 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

## Useful Links

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

[UNHCR operations overview in Europe](#)

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

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