

Regional Bureau for Europe

UPDATE # 15

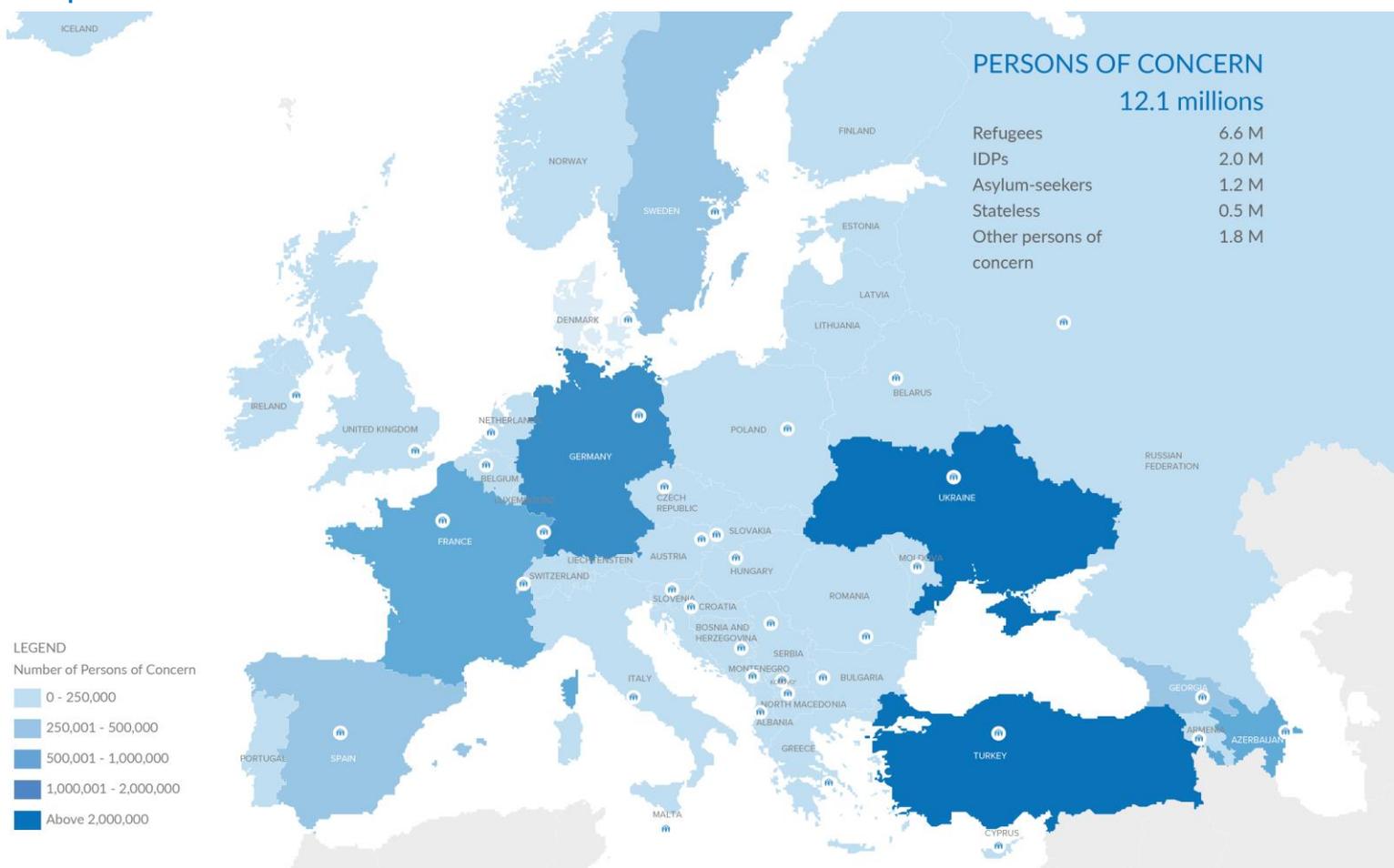
4 - 18 August 2020

Many countries have lifted broad movement and travel restrictions, which consequently facilitates **access to territory and international protection. However**, due to renewed COVID-19 spikes, certain countries have postponed or **reversed lifting of some restrictions**.

UNHCR staff across Europe is gradually moving back to office premises. 36 offices are now **partially teleworking**, while 1 remains on **full teleworking mode** as of 18 August.

UNHCR and partners' physical access to persons of concern is generally improving, 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, 32 countries have reported cases among persons of concern, and some of them have already recovered. However, any figure or estimate 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 (levels comparable to early May) with restrictions to international travel in form of travel recommendations, quarantine upon arrival from high-risk areas or requirement to present a negative COVID-19 test no older than 48 hours. This may affect access to territory and asylum for people in need of international protection.
- In some West and South European countries, new movement restrictions have been imposed on the population. This is the case in **Belgium, France, Italy, Spain** and **UK**, for example, where measures like localized lockdowns, mandatory use of masks in public spaces, and closure of night life have been imposed.
- UNHCR country offices are gradually resuming suspended activities, including protection monitoring at borders. As of 18 August, 36 offices in the region were partially teleworking, while one office remains in full telework mode.

UNHCR Response

- UNHCR's response to the COVID-19 situation is focuses 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 travel bans were being lifted, access to territory and international protection continued to improve in parallel to exemptions to entry restrictions for asylum-seekers. However, with many countries experiencing COVID-19 spikes, varying degrees of movement restrictions and mandatory testing and quarantine measures upon arrival were imposed.

- **Italy**, has seen a significant number of new arrivals by sea, who all had to follow the COVID-19 prevention protocol in place to tackle the challenges posed by the lack of adequate space where the number of new arrivals exceeds the capacity of quarantine facilities. However, as new arrivals to Lampedusa outpace the transfer of arrivals to other locations, the Lampedusa hotspot was, as of 17 August, overcrowded, hosting some 1,000 individuals in spaces that was already expanded with the capacity to accommodate 200 people. To secure more quarantining space, two vessels with a combined capacity of some 900 people have become operational. In addition, to reinforce health measures, Sicilian authorities have introduced swab testing for all new sea arrivals, considered more reliable than serological testing.
- Similarly, in **Malta**, authorities have issued a call for ships to be used as quarantine vessels to isolate people who have been rescued at sea. [Times of Malta](#) reports that, according to the call, the Government is seeking to host up to 200 rescued persons for up to a month.
- In **Spain**, where the overcrowded Melilla centre with a capacity for 780 is hosting over 1,300 individuals, the interim facility at the bullfight arena Plaza de Toros was established to quarantine new arrivals. However, the reception and sanitary conditions are insufficient and the location is already hosting some 500 people. The operation continues monitoring the situation and advocates with national authorities to address the living conditions in these centres, especially regarding movement restrictions in place. In **Montenegro**, authorities opened a new transit centre on 3 August to accommodate new arrivals in line with the COVID-19 prevention measures. While the new centre as yet to overcome initial set-up challenges, UNHCR has been present from its opening and it is expected that the new centre will improve access to asylum.
- During the reporting period, reports of pushbacks persisted in many parts of the region, especially in **Central and South Eastern Europe**. In some countries, UNHCR remains concerned by reports of violence against asylum-seekers and advocates for investigations to be pursued.
- In some countries, increasing number of onward movements were reported. This is the case from **France** to **UK** for example, across the English channel. UNHCR is advocating with authorities to enhance information dissemination and explore legal pathways to the UK and discourage attempts at irregular crossings.
- Asylum procedures have been resumed in most States. However, in many instances, resumption of interviews in line with new health regulations and accumulated backlog presents a challenge, and case processing is picking up at a slower pace than usual. This is the case in **Spain**, some interview appointments are given for 2021. To address some of these issues, Madrid local authorities have strengthened their workforce and report that they are able to reach an average of 450 daily interviews scheduled within two weeks. UNHCR continues to monitor the situation in order to prevent any loss in procedural quality. In **Italy**, the Ministry of Interior has started to implement a pilot for remote Refugee Status Determination (RSD) interviews. A first group of 35 asylum-seekers currently observing quarantine is scheduled for interviewing during the second half of August. In the meantime, UNHCR shared with the asylum authorities a checklist for remote RSD interviews, and a template to guide the interview set-up, including a confidentiality statement for non-RSD staff providing technological support in the reception facility. In **Albania**, UNHCR continued to support asylum authorities by submitting a list of prioritised actions on asylum for further discussion and joint action.
- In **Bosnia and Herzegovina**, a worrisome increase in Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC) and children in male-headed families living in centers and squats was reported, as well as challenges regarding assessment of children's best interest and provision of protection services. Shelters are not child friendly and chronically lack capacities for social work. To date, about 500 children are reported living in such circumstances in the country. In **Serbia**, UNHCR and its partners continue to advocate with authorities to resolve the protracted (over 5 months) preventive isolation of UASC in the Vodovodska facility, and provide support to organize recreative activities in order to tackle some of the negative psychological consequences of the prolonged restriction of movement.
- **Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs)**: In **Ukraine**, as of 13 August, 14,880 persons crossed the 'contact line' from the Non-Government Controlled Area (NGCA) to the Government-Controlled Area (GCA) and 11,443 persons did so from GCA to NGCA at the **Stanytsia Luhanska** Entry Exit Checkpoint (EECP). The two electric cars operated by UNHCR and partner Proliska serviced 4,840 people with special needs. Luhansk de facto authorities further installed a mobile COVID-19 testing point near the EECP, where those aiming to cross can pay for a test and have results delivered within 48 hours. However, the cost for the test remains high, and not financially accessible to everyone. The **Novotroitske/Olenivka** checkpoint continued operating twice per week for people on the pre-approved lists prepared by the Donetsk de facto authorities. On average, some 20 people remain stranded at this EECP at any given period.

- As cases among the general population are increasing in the GCA, new prevention measures have been put in place, including movement restrictions across the boundary line with the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol with exceptions for students, medical and family reasons. Humanitarian actors and civil society continue assisting those willing to cross.
- In **Turkey**, two rooms were set up at the Verification Centre of İzmir provincial migration authorities to carry out remote resettlement interviews with Syrian refugees as of 10 August.

**HEALTH**

- In **Greece**, 256 persons of concern have tested positive to COVID-19 as of 18 August. Out of these, 224 are on mainland and 32 are on the islands.
- In line with a new generalised order to wear face masks in public spaces, all residents, staff and humanitarian actors visiting refugee-hosting centres are now required to wear masks. As requested by the authorities, UNHCR and IOM support the provision of masks for these groups.
- While the new medical quarantine protocol for new arrivals has been applicable since 27 July, the authorities' readiness to ensure 14-day quarantine on the islands and in Evros remains largely inadequate. To date, medical areas have been identified in all locations hosting a reception and identification centre (RIC) but the structures are yet to be fully set up in most places.
- In **Evros**, UNHCR donated two containers for isolation and medical screening, as well as a large quantity of personal protective equipment (PPE) and core relief items (CRIs) to police and asylum authorities for further distribution. Shading structures were installed to allow information sessions to take place outdoors, as well as upgraded health and WASH facilities in the RIC with plumbing and disinfection material. The local hospital was equipped with a container for screening purposes. In the meantime, following the identification of 14 positive cases in Fylakio (Evros) RIC, the entire site has been placed under quarantine. New arrivals will remain for prolonged periods in police facilities, which are not equipped for this purpose. UNHCR is liaising with authorities to identify solutions and operational interventions. In **Leros**, the medical area and an isolation space for new arrivals are being finalized. In **Kos**, work is expected to start this week, while in **Chios** and **Samos** technical plans are being discussed.
- As of 3 August, UNHCR has provided accommodation and protection services to 1,791 asylum-seekers vulnerable to COVID-19 complications. These individuals have been transferred out of island RIC to alternative accommodations. The population in the island RICs dropped to 25,150, down from almost 40,000 before the pandemic. However, compared to the capacity for 5,400, the sites remain overcrowded with unhygienic conditions prevailing.
- In **Ukraine**, on 6 August, a UNHCR convoy delivered six tons of humanitarian assistance to conflict-affected persons in **Donetsk** NGCA, including electric bicycles for community workers, household items, water containers, electrical appliance, and bed linen. The items were received by 28 territorial centres and 53 first-aid points, which remain primary health care providers in these areas.
- Two convoys facilitated by UNHCR and OCHA also reached **Luhansk** NGCA across the pedestrian-only EECF in Stanytsia Luhanska during the reporting period. The convoys delivered 123 electric bicycles and 2,050 medical gowns for health care providers and social workers, and 21 tons of construction materials and PPEs. Since this is a pedestrian crossing, the humanitarian cargo had to be transferred manually by UNHCR's and People in Need's teams.
- In-kind distributions during the reporting period included hygiene kits for Roma settlements; critical PPEs to frontline medical facilities along the 'contact line' (4,320 medical masks and gloves, 33 glasses, 1,080 medical gowns); and 30 bicycles to increase the mobility of health care and social workers to reach isolated areas in Luhansk NGCA as part of UNHCR's Peaceful Coexistence Projects.



COMMUNICATION WITH COMMUNITIES

- In **Armenia**, UNHCR and migration authorities are maintaining a Telegram channel to raise awareness about available state assistance measures for persons of concern and developments related to the state of emergency in the country.
- In **Bulgaria**, the office and partners have focused communication efforts on job seeking and the labour market, which was already difficult to enter due to language gaps.
- In **Malta**, the operation continues to translate and disseminate official information through various channels. UNHCR's and partners' helplines remain active and inform UNHCR's interaction and follow-up with authorities.
- In **Montenegro**, communication with the asylum centre residents was strengthened through Whatsapp groups in four languages.
- In **Romania**, the operation launched a bilingual social media campaign to promote the results of the third Rapid Assessment Report, led by UNICEF, with a focus on results on education, health and social services for refugees.
- In **Spain**, the office has reopened its Help Desk, respecting new health regulations, to offer advice upon appointment where online counselling is inadequate.
- In **Ukraine**, on 10 August, the operation and its partner installed three free Wifi hotspots at the EECF Stanytsia Luhanska for people to access a range of key public services online, including the COVID-19 tracing app that is mandatory before entry into the GCA.



CASH-BASED AND IN-KIND ASSISTANCE

- In **Armenia**, a diaspora-based NGO continued to provide cash assistance and reached 20 vulnerable displaced Syrian families during the reporting period.
- In **Georgia**, the operation provided cash assistance to 263 families (551 individuals) and, in Abkhazia, due to the dire situation of returnees, UNHCR's partner distributed food packages to 164 vulnerable individuals to cope with the consequences of the COVID-19 prevention measures.
- In **Moldova**, the operation is assessing a possibility of providing further one-off cash assistance to persons of concern who have lost their income due to COVID-19.
- In **Turkey**, the distribution of cash cards for the COVID-19 emergency cash assistance that started in May continues. After 15,255 families (72,182 individuals) were found eligible at the end of July, 12,405 families (52,641 individuals) have been identified as recipients pending approval by authorities.

Working in partnership

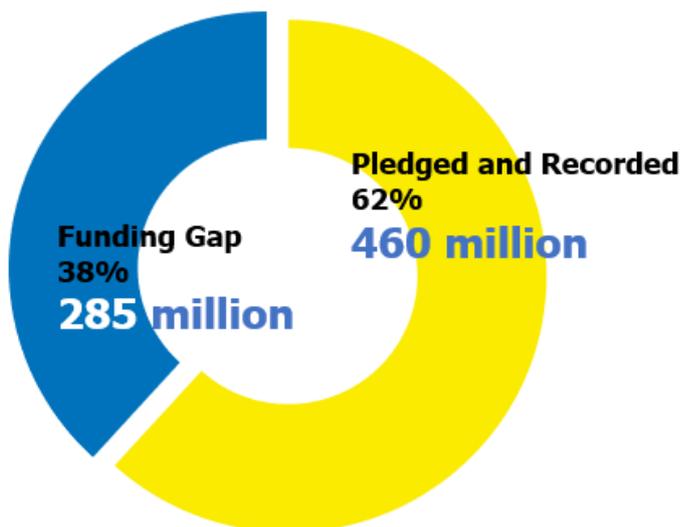
- UNHCR supports governments' efforts to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic through existing coordination mechanisms and by working closely with WHO and other partners. In addition, UNHCR co-chairs the Issue-Based Coalition on Large Movements of People, Displacement and Resilience, steering collective 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 460 M (62%)

Including: United States of America \$186.3M | Germany \$62.7M | European Union \$44.6M | 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](#)

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

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