

Regional Bureau for Europe

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Movement restrictions 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.

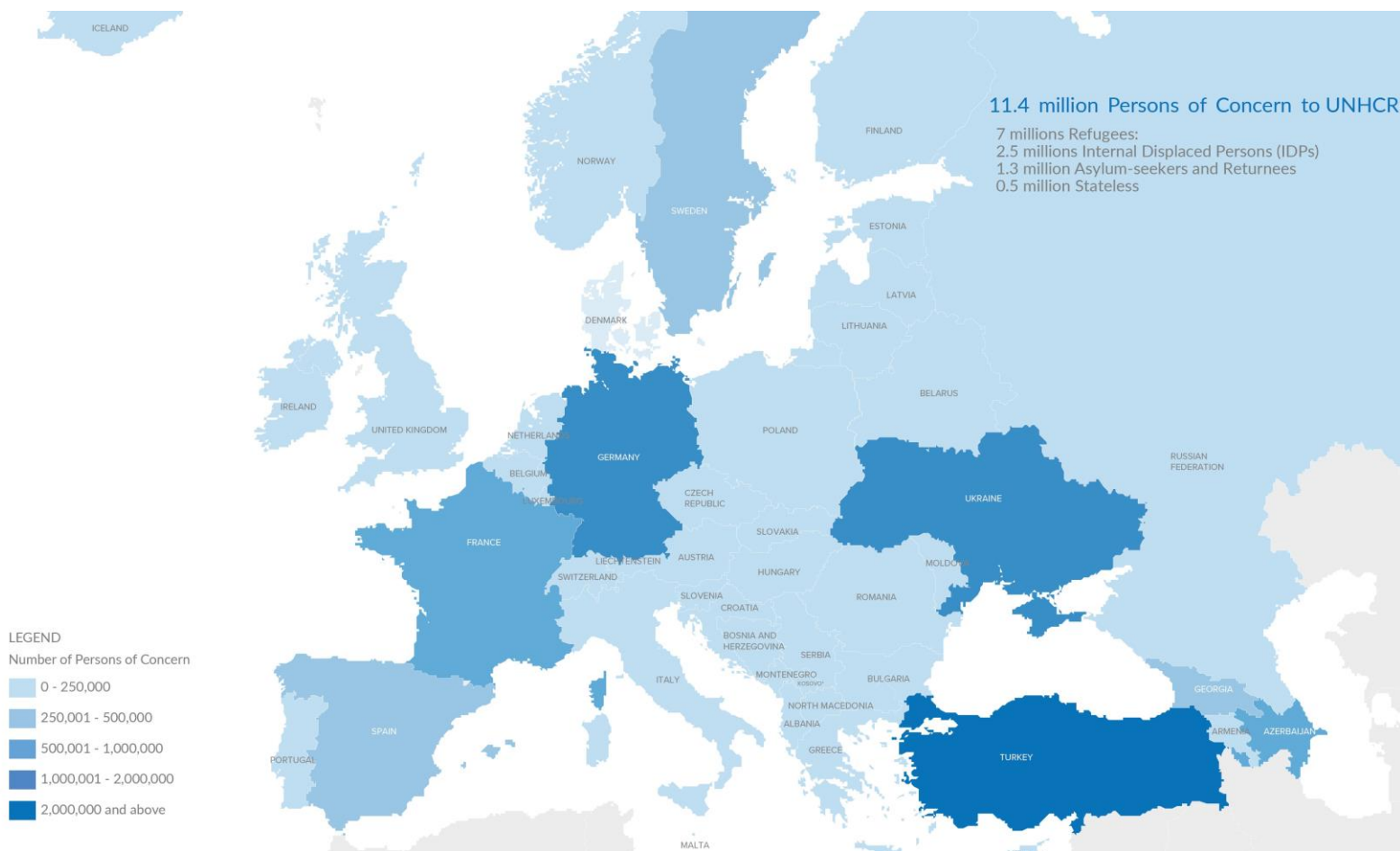
Access to territory is limited through border closures or entry bans for foreigners, with only a few exceptions.

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

Asylum procedures have been suspended in some countries in the region, however many provide for exemptions to allow entry for persons seeking international protection, including through innovative ways either by law or by practice.

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, 14 countries have reported cases among persons of concern. However, any figure or estimate at this point need to be taken with caution due to differing approaches of testing, data segregation and reporting.
- Access to territory remains affected by COVID-19 related border management measures. 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.
- While authorities in States such as Austria, Croatia, Denmark, Norway and Spain have started publicly referring to plans of progressive lifting of lockdowns, movement restrictions across borders and within countries have been extended for further weeks in most countries in the region. Temporary restrictions on non-essential travel to the EU remain in place until 15 May. UNHCR teleworking arrangements and alternatives to remotely access persons of concern are maintained. Reception conditions remain of general concern and some countries continue applying stricter confinement measures to persons of concern than to the general population.
- The European Commission issued the [“Joint European Roadmap towards lifting COVID-19 containment measures”](#) on 15 April, encouraging a coordinated, phased and non-discriminatory approach to lifting measures and reopening borders (lifting bans for cross-border workers first, followed by opening internal borders, followed by external borders, upon review).
- On 16 April, the European Commission issued a new communication [guidance on the implementation of relevant EU provisions in the area of asylum and return procedures and on resettlement](#) in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The guidance illustrates how to ensure continuity of procedures to the extent possible, while fully ensuring the protection of people’s health and fundamental rights. UNHCR’s [paper on practical recommendations and good practices](#) to address protection concerns in the COVID-19 context, issued by the Regional Bureau for Europe, fed into the consultation process related to the European Commission’s guidance.
- On 14 April, UNHCR and the Council of Europe issued a [joint statement](#) encouraging States to benefit from the support that refugee health professionals can provide to national health systems. Many refugees and asylum-seekers in Europe have the qualifications, experience and willingness to get involved in the COVID-19 response but, given the tight regulations of health-related professions, most lack the approval by national health authorities. The statement advocates for the use of the European Qualifications Passport for Refugees (EQPR), a tool facilitating recognition of qualifications that will enable national health authorities to determine how best to deploy refugee resources, as needed. Engagement with partners has been strengthened to identify willing health practitioners within the refugee communities and facilitate access to online tests.

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.
- Efforts are being made to strengthen COVID-19 preparedness and response led by the national authorities, in particular in the following operations: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Greece (the largest operation in the region), Italy, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Spain and Ukraine, while also closely monitoring the situation in Cyprus and Malta.
 - Regular programme delivery to provide critical protection assistance to persons of concern remains a priority for all operations across the region.

UNHCR Areas of Intervention



PROTECTION

Achievements and Impact

- In **Greece**, the COVID-19 situation has accelerated the **relocation of unaccompanied children** from the Greek islands to volunteering EU member states. On 15 April, twelve unaccompanied children reached Luxembourg and 49 travelled to Germany on 18 April. UNHCR led the interagency team on the islands for rapid identification and best interest determination, and coordinated with concerned authorities, EASO, IOM, and the European Commission on the transfers. The European Commission is working with stakeholders to finalise Standard Operating Procedures for the relocation of 1,600 children.
- Where registration is suspended, concerns over lack of documentation can emerge. Some countries, such as **Bosnia and Herzegovina** and **Germany** have maintained the issuance of documentation to ensure legal stay and access to services. In other countries, such as **Italy, Ireland, Poland, Portugal**, and **Spain**, the validity of the documents of asylum-seekers has been extended for the duration of the exceptional measures, in order to ensure legal stay and access to critical services.
- In other States, innovative approaches have been implemented to allow for online submissions of asylum applications, appeals and/or documentation including renewals, such as in **Malta** and **Azerbaijan**. Similar approaches have been applied to applications for statelessness determination, such as in the **United Kingdom**.
- In view of the unfolding COVID-19 situation, and in light of the heightened risk this poses for people in detention facilities, including asylum-seekers, a number of European countries have started to release asylum-seekers from detention and have refrained from placing people in closed facilities, including new arrivals. This includes, for example, **Austria, Belgium, Luxembourg, Spain**,

Switzerland and the **United Kingdom**, while such measures are reportedly under consideration in a number of other States.

- In **Ukraine**, protection monitoring has been strengthened in 119 localities along the contact line in eastern Ukraine to monitor the impact of COVID-19 and related measures. All monitoring summaries, including the latest protection monitoring reports, are available [here](#), and insights are regularly shared with relevant counterparts to enhance their planning and response.
- As a result of strengthened advocacy efforts, some countries in the region have resorted to transfers of persons of concern from centres to hotels, such as **Greece** and **Spain**. Similar efforts have been undertaken by child protection authorities to safely re-accommodate unaccompanied children to alternative facilities. In **Cyprus**, work has been undertaken to address some shortcomings, which led to improvements. Additional work is needed to address the lack access to electricity, health care and basic hygiene items.



HEALTH

- In **Greece**, an urgent response is underway to "shield" older persons and the immunocompromised population living in the island reception and identification centres (RIC), who are most vulnerable to complications due to COVID-19. The shielding initiative includes expedited transfers to apartments that are part of the EC-funded ESTIA scheme or other appropriate facilities, and to contracted hotels on the Aegean islands. So far, UNHCR has transferred 677 people out of RICs, including 417 to different accommodations (hotels and apartments) on the islands and 260 to apartments on the mainland.
- In the region, where national health systems are generally the primary responders to the medical needs of persons of concern, the virus spread has been stretching the capacities of most of these systems for all populations. Additional concerns have been raised about the lack of health services for undocumented persons and persons staying irregularly. Stateless persons and other vulnerable groups are also believed to be less likely to receive health services in case of COVID-19 symptoms. Where detention is practiced, access to health services is challenging, and hygiene and sanitary facilities are below standard.



COMMUNICATION WITH COMMUNITIES

- Across the region, communication with communities has been enhanced using a variety of channels and collaborating with partners and authorities to amplify the outreach to refugees and asylum-seekers. To reach people in reception and detention centres, where access remains limited, remote monitoring and means of communication have been scaled up, including through hotlines, social media and other digital platforms. Legal services are offered over the phone by partners in most operations.
- Like in a few other countries, in **Ukraine**, a Telegram app channel was set up to share daily COVID-19 updates with refugees and asylum-seekers. Information includes reports and advice from authorities and the WHO, translated by UNHCR into six languages of relevance for persons of concern. In **Spain**, after several weeks of strict COVID-19-related measures, a questionnaire was shared with persons of concern to determine any gaps in access to rights during the confinement and to fine-tune assistance and protection support. A web survey reached about 500 persons of concern, and refugee focal point volunteers contacted refugee communities by phone and WhatsApp.

- These channels of communication are being used by persons of concern to report issues related to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). UNHCR offices across the region are monitoring this protection risk and preparing for a response. COVID-19 restrictions on movement as well as reduced capacity of service providers can pose a particular challenge to survivors, both to report as well as to get the needed services and care.



CASH-BASED ASSISTANCE

- In several countries, cash assistance programmes were extended to include persons at particular risk of COVID complications and those most at risk of losing livelihood or accommodation due to COVID-related measures. In **Ukraine**, one-time emergency cash assistance was provided to 229 refugees and asylum-seekers with specific needs, as a preventive measure in view of the COVID-19 pandemic. Refugees belonging to “health risk groups,” such as those with serious medical conditions, were prioritized. In **Montenegro**, exceptional basic financial assistance for accommodation was granted to sixteen asylum-seekers residing in private accommodation and at risk of eviction after having lost their livelihoods. In **Turkey**, to address the needs of those at risk due to loss of informal jobs, government counterparts and UNHCR have been developing an **emergency cash scheme** for one-time assistance to reach between 10,000 and 20,000 households.
- At the country level, where State measures were adopted to mitigate the economic impact of the crisis, advocacy was pursued to include persons of concern in COVID-19-related measure packages. For example, in the **United Kingdom**, advocacy efforts have been geared towards including the monthly financial assistance provided to asylum-seekers and other persons of concern in the Government’s decision to raise the mainstream benefits for the duration of the emergency, given that the current support of GBP 5 per day makes it impossible to follow guidelines on hygiene and distancing. In **Spain**, where national public housing plans were just modified to expand access to house rental aids and loans for individuals with immediate needs (e.g. survivors of SGBV, homeless, evicted and others who have become economically and socially vulnerable due to COVID-19 measures), formal confirmation of inclusion of persons of concern has been sought.



SHELTER AND NON-FOOD ITEMS

- In **Greece**, a stock of Core Relief Items ready for distribution to 10,000 individuals, and a contingency stock to address the needs of another 5,000 individuals arrived on the Aegean islands. The stocks include tents, solar lamps, plastic sheets, mats, napkins, baby care kits and jerry cans.
- In some countries, operations and their partners have distributed emergency food and hygienic items to the homes of persons of concern at particular risk.

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 is 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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