

Regional Bureau for Europe

UPDATE # 9

27 May – 3 June 2020

Across the region, **movement restrictions are gradually being lifted** and, in many countries, it is expected that travel across internal borders will start to resume in June.

Seventeen **UNHCR offices** in the region have shifted from full-time to partial telework.

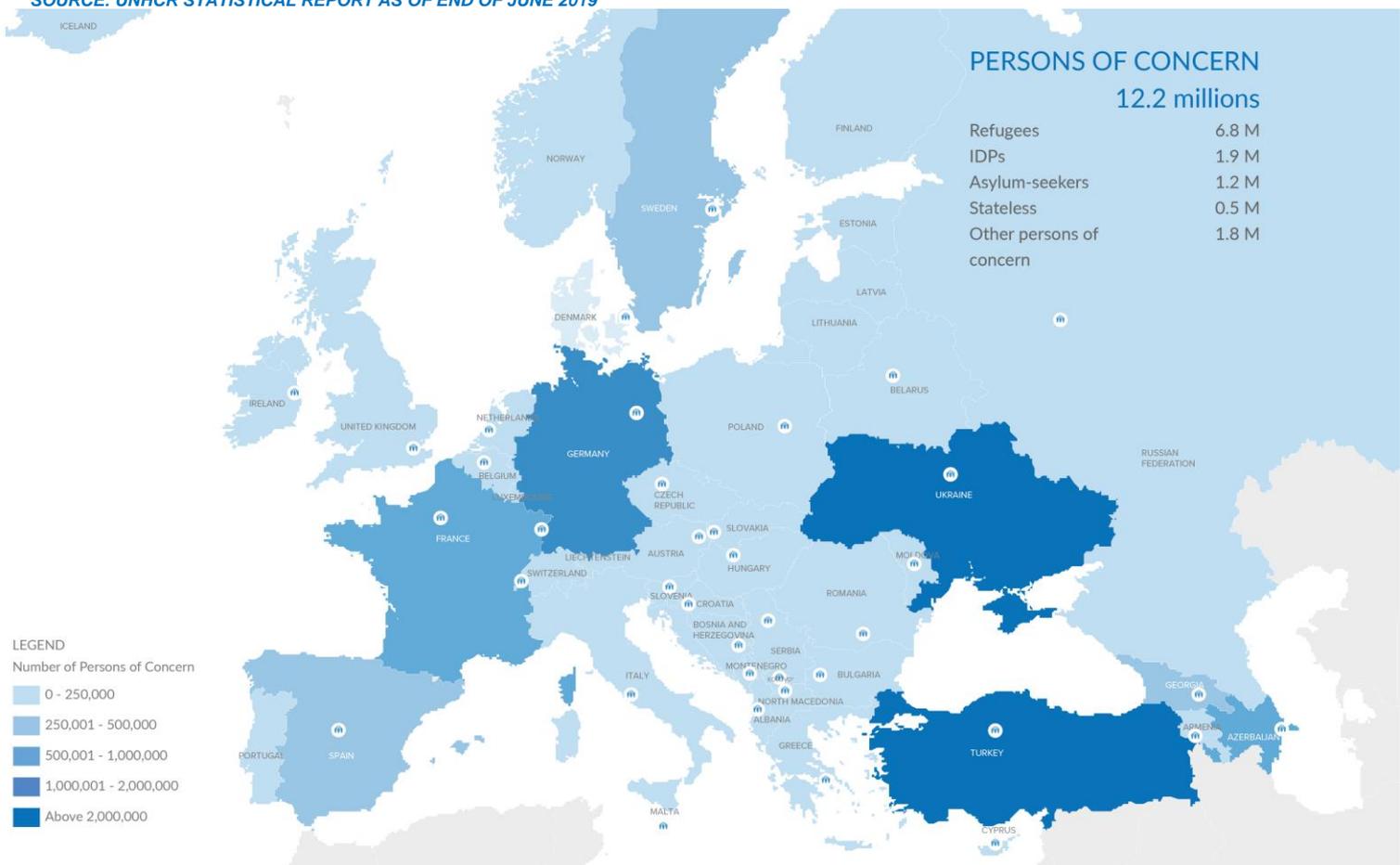
Access to territory remains limited through border closures or entry bans for foreigners, with only a few exceptions.

Many countries in the region continue to maintain access to **international protection** despite restrictions on access to territory.

UNHCR and partners' physical access to persons of concern remains limited. It is however anticipated that this will improve with the progressive lifting of movement restrictions, in compliance with COVID-19 preventive measures.

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 among the general population. So far, 18 countries have reported cases among persons of concern, and some of them have already recovered. However, any figure or estimate at this point needs to be taken with caution due to differing approaches to testing, data segregation and reporting.
- On 26 May, the EU Ministers for European Affairs [exchanged views](#) on a comprehensive approach to the de-escalation of containment measures, economic recovery and resumption of social activities.
- The members of the European Economic Area Council discussed on 25 May the overall functioning of the EEA Agreement and the effect of the pandemic on the internal market. They adopted a [joint statement](#) addressing several areas including the response to the pandemic, the development of the internal market, and the European Green Deal.
- On 27 May, the Chair of the Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI) of the Council of Europe published a [statement](#) calling for increased vigilance regarding the treatment of marginalised groups such as Roma and migrants in times of crisis. She reminded governments of their responsibility to ensure these communities have access to all necessary services when quarantine or other restrictions are proclaimed.
- UNHCR has called on the EU to play a leading role in protecting refugees, forcibly displaced and the stateless both inside and outside its borders in the context of the response to the pandemic. [UNHCR's Five Key Calls to the European Union on the COVID-19 response](#) advocate for enhanced solidarity and search for protection solutions to persons of concern. The document also promotes for the EU to ensure adequate access to health and socio-economic services, a continued financial support to refugee hosting countries, and refugees' empowerment to assist in the response.
- As a result of lifted restrictions, some UNHCR country offices are planning to gradually resume some of the suspended activities, for example protection monitoring at borders. As of this week, seven offices continue to work fully virtually, after 17 have shifted from full-time to partial teleworking.

UNHCR Response

- UNHCR's response to the COVID-19 situation is focusing on:
 - Continuing to provide protection assistance including legal aid, 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;
 - 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 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

- With movement restrictions relaxing, the number of people transiting through South Eastern Europe have picked up. Reports of push-backs in relation to hundreds of individuals at various borders in Central and South Eastern Europe have reached several offices. Of great concern to UNHCR are reports about denial of asylum, theft, mistreatment and physical abuse by border guards.
- To address contagion risks in reception centres, some countries continue working on expanding reception capacities. In **Montenegro**, a new centre close to the Albanian border is expected to open on 15 June with a capacity of up to 60 persons. The facility will be used to register asylum intentions. In **Spain**, authorities transferred 140 people from the overcrowded centre in the Melilla enclave to mainland. This is the second transfer since the beginning of COVID restrictions in mid-March. An interim centre has been set up in Melilla and is hosting over 300 people, including asylum-seekers. While efforts to decongest the Melilla centre are welcome, it continues to be overcrowded with some 1,400 persons in installations with a capacity for 780.
- In **Malta**, direct access to closed centres remains limited, therefore most closed facilities are remotely monitored by phone and urgent concerns are raised with relevant authorities. Currently, the largest open centre, Hal Far Tent Village, hosts 844 men. A separate zone within the centre is planned to host boys under 18. This, although not being ideal, will be an improvement as a result of advocacy. Alternatives for the 1,700 asylum-seekers currently detained in three detention centres are still needed, as the Hal Far Tent Village open centre does not have the capacity to accommodate all of them.
- In **Turkey**, as part of the Government's plan, Provincial Directorates of Migration Management in three provinces resumed registration procedures for temporary protection and international protection as of 1 June. Activities are implemented by applying COVID-19 precautionary measures.
- In some countries, with the pandemic and related measures impacting the labour market, persons of concern are facing a number of specific risks that make them vulnerable to wrongful contract termination and other abusive practices by employers. Efforts to address the situation include extending legal support through legal aid partners to asylum-seekers and refugees, advocate with authorities for verifications of employment conditions, and producing and disseminating information material on labour rights for immigrants, asylum-seekers and refugees in the context of the pandemic.



HEALTH

- Reception conditions remain dire and health risks may be heightened where centres are overcrowded or underequipped. In **Armenia**, persons of concern residing in reception facilities face many challenges, including related to the suspension of regular health care and rehabilitation activities in medical facilities. A lack of personal protective equipment for facility staff and residents further compounds health risks.
- In the Kokkinotrimithia camp in **Cyprus**, 744 persons are living under problematic hygienic circumstances. While movement restrictions for the general population were lifted, people in this camp remain confined, allegedly due to a scabies outbreak, and there is no clarity as for upcoming steps. The office continues to advocate with authorities to address the situation.

- In **Greece**, as of 31 May, three additional of persons of concern were tested positive to COVID-19, bringing the total to 211 individuals, of which 207 are in mainland sites and four are on Lesbos, in the quarantine area of Megala Therma, in the recently opened Apanemo site.
- The Apanemo site, equipped with tents and sanitary installations, is the only site with a functional quarantine area ready to use. The operation supports groups of new arrivals by providing designated toilets, showers and fencing, as well as access to clean water through water tanks and jerry cans. A second quarantine area in Kara Tepe, in the south of Lesbos, is expected to become operational in early June, and will be supporting the 16 people who have been staying in the port area since their arrival on 21 May.
- Four isolation and medical examination units, as well as plumbing and disinfection material have been donated to the Evros reception centre and two hospitals. On Chios, Reception and Identification Centres (RIC) access to water has been increased for residents with an additional four hours of water availability per day through water trucking. UNHCR's programme also provided 20 chemical toilets, 60 portable sinks and liquid soap and completed the dislodging, cleaning and repairing of 15 toilets and 10 showers.
- Access to detention facilities for UNHCR and other actors has resumed to a large extent, with preventive measures and restrictions still in place. National health services are testing the most vulnerable detainees and staff in certain facilities for COVID-19.
- UNHCR is concerned over government-arranged exit of some 9,000 recognized refugees from Greece's reception system, which began on 1 June. In the coming months, another 11,000 refugees will find themselves in a similar situation. These actions are based on the March 2020 law, which reduces from six months to 30 days the period of support after recognition, leaving recognized refugees with a short time to transition from organized accommodation and basic support to a self-sufficiency, which will be challenging. While the objective is to make more accommodations available for asylum-seekers and decongest reception facilities on the Aegean islands, UNHCR has continuously expressed concerns that assistance for recognized refugees ending before they have effective access to employment and social welfare schemes will leave them without a safety net and measures to ensure their self-reliance, and may push many into poverty and homelessness, as well as consider finding a livelihood elsewhere in the EU.. UNHCR has proposed concrete measures to the authorities and is working with the Government to promote effective inclusion in the national plans. In addition, advocacy continues to urge the Government to increase the national reception capacity at sites, apartments, hotels and through cash for shelter. UNHCR issued a [briefing note](#) in Geneva on the matter on 2 June.
- In **Ukraine**, sustaining a positive result of negotiations facilitated by UNHCR and other humanitarian organizations, Ukrainian authorities and the Luhansk de-facto authorities issued further permissions for 69 civilians to cross at the pedestrian-only Entry-Exit checkpoint (EECP) in Stanytsia Luhanska on 30 May. The full opening of this checkpoint is planned for 22 June. UNHCR, UN Resident Coordinator's Office and other UN agencies have prepared recommendations for the Government on COVID-19 mitigation measures to be considered during the re-opening of all entry-exit checkpoints.
- On 28 May, the first UN-NGO humanitarian convoy reached the non-government controlled area of Luhanska through the EECP Stanytsia Luhanska since movement across the contact line was suspended in March. The cargo had to be transported by trolley across the pedestrian bridge. Five trucks brought 9.5 tons of humanitarian assistance by WHO and NGOs People in Need and Médicos del Mundo, including 17,000 PPE items for health care workers. Earlier on during the pandemic, two humanitarian convoys of trucks had reached the non-government controlled area of Donetsk.
- Distribution of assistance continued, with community-produced hygiene kits delivered to Temporary Accommodation Centres (TACs) that host 250 asylum-seekers on 22 May. Further, a donation of seasonal clothes from the NGO partner ADRA was distributed on 1 June to TACs and Roma settlements in Zakarpattya oblast, where many persons at risk of statelessness reside. In conflict-affected areas, critical NFIs were distributed to hospitals in Donetsk oblast. On 1 June, healthcare facilities along the contact line received medical items and PPE. The aim is to have 10 facilities along the contact line strengthened through this assistance.



COMMUNICATION WITH COMMUNITIES

- Communication with Communities has been key during the pandemic to disseminate timely, factual and clear information allowing for equal and non-discriminatory access to health and other services, but also to include feedback and proposed responses by the persons of concern. In **Europe**, numerous promising practices by authorities, partners and UNHCR offices have emerged over the past months, which, if maintained and adapted, can contribute to enhanced community engagement across Europe also after the public health emergency will have subsided. On 2 June, UNHCR's Regional Bureau for Europe issued the paper "[Risk Communication and Community Engagement: Positive Practices from Europe during COVID](#)", seeking to facilitate the sharing of practices and inspire new initiatives.



LIVELIHOODS

- On 27 May, NGO partner the Right to Protection (R2P) released findings of a [survey \(in Ukrainian\)](#) on challenges faced by stateless persons in accessing medical care, as well as on the socio-economic impact of quarantine restrictions on their livelihoods. The study found that 57% of the 189 stateless persons (or at risk of statelessness) surveyed from 24 April to 6 May have lost their employment during the pandemic. The majority had been employed illegally due to lack of documentation and could not access unemployment benefits. 73% of recipients reported being in need of humanitarian assistance, specifically food, medical and hygiene items. 92% reported that the lack of documentation prevented them being able to access general medical practitioners. Previously, the Ministry of Health had issued instructions that medical consultations and treatment for COVID-19 related symptoms should be provided regardless of the possession documents and/or a passport.



CASH-BASED AND IN-KIND ASSISTANCE

- In **Armenia**, on 22 May, the operation finalised the distribution of one-time cash assistance, started on 16 April, to 507 refugee households who are currently beneficiaries of cash-based interventions or with extremely vulnerable members that are unable to access State-led support schemes. The support amounts to a two-month emergency cash assistance. The office is conducting a post-distribution monitoring and the survey took place from 26 to 29 May.
- In **Azerbaijan**, following advocacy with authorities on inclusion of persons of concern in State-run programmes for vulnerable citizens, 658 refugee and asylum-seeking families had received food assistance as of 1 June, out of the planned 980 households.
- In **Bulgaria**, partners delivered food packages, financial assistance and medical support to 275 households identified through a vulnerability assessment.
- In **Georgia**, the operation supported almost 500 vulnerable families in Abkhazia with 20 litres of fuel per household mainly for agricultural use. In addition, 50 kg of fertilizers per household will be distributed in June. The support is needed due to the very stretched resources of the Gali population due to the pandemic, and to ensure that livelihoods and food security are not more severely impacted.
- In **Turkey**, on 29 May, the operation started the distribution of cards for the one-off cash assistance. As endorsed by authorities, the first distribution will reach 7,379 families all over the country within 5 days. Further distribution rounds for other households are being considered.

Stories from the field

In **Germany**, the rail operator **Deutsche Bahn's integration programme** offers refugees a chance to access permanent employment and also fills a gap in the labour market. This three-year long programme enables newcomers to prepare for a vocational traineeship. Participants acquire a range of skills, including installation, control engineering and programming. The scheme offers places to 300 applicants a year across nine German cities, and upon validation of the final exams, trainees are guaranteed a permanent job with Deutsche Bahn.



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**, 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 **Romania**, the office participated in the UNICEF-led joint **rapid needs assessment** to ascertain the situation of most vulnerable children and their families during the pandemic, focusing on access to online education. Asylum-seeking and refugee children residing both in reception centres and urban settings were included. Findings will be finalised in June.
- 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.

Total contributed or pledged to UNHCR COVID-19 appeal

USD 235 M

Including: United States of America \$64.0M | Germany \$38.0M | European Union \$31.8M | United Kingdom \$24.8M | Japan \$23.9M | Denmark \$14.6M | CERF \$6.9M | Canada \$6.4M | Ireland \$3.3M |

Private donors \$3.1M | Sweden \$3.0M | Sony Corporation \$3.0M | Finland \$2.4M | Education Cannot Wait \$1.8M | Qatar Charity \$1.5M | 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 | United Kingdom \$31.7M | Private donors in Spain \$26.6M | Germany \$25.9M | Switzerland \$16.4M | Private donors in Republic of Korea \$13.9M

Useful Links

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

[UNHCR operations overview in Europe](#)

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

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