

UNHCR'S RESPONSE

TO EUROPE'S
REFUGEE
EMERGENCY

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A UNHCR staff member comforts a young refugee boy after his boat landed on the Greek island of Lesbos. © UNHCR / H. Holland

UNHCR'S RESPONSE AT A GLANCE



Emergency winterized shelter
and WASH facilities for up to

20,000
places in 35 locations



Non-stop presence of UNHCR
teams at all countries' entry
points and in a number of exit
points and other strategic
locations along the route



200,000
consultations

Medical assistance provided by a number of
different governmental and non-governmental
organizations and UNHCR's partners.



Free access to internet and
communications provided through
partners at main assistance points

+ 700
additional
staff

> 11
most impacted
countries

299,040
Non Food Items

including blankets, winter clothing
and shoes, sleeping mats, hygiene kits,
diapers, delivered in 5 countries.

280,000
high energy bars packages

distributed in Greece,
FYROM and Serbia
(donation from WFP)



10
Children and family Support Hubs
established in coordination
with UNICEF and ICRC

1,600
Families reunited
through direct intervention
of UNHCR or partners



> 4,300
unaccompanied and
separated children

identified by UNHCR and
partners and referred
to partners or national
authorities as relevant

SEEKING TO SAVE LIVES, PROVIDE HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE AND ENSURE THE PROTECTION OF REFUGEES

In 2015, over one million refugees and migrants undertook the perilous journey across the Mediterranean Sea, most in search of safety. The vast majority (79%) of these people come from the world's top 10 refugee-producing countries, primarily from the Syrian Arab Republic (Syria), Afghanistan and Iraq. The movement was also marked by a shift to the eastern Mediterranean route with 856,723 of the arrivals reaching Greek shores in 2015. The Western Balkans route became an important transit axis, with tens of thousands of people who, after arriving to Greece, continued their movement through several countries in the Western Balkans and further north before reaching their final destinations in Northern or Western Europe. Despite numerous indications, the extent of these movements caught the affected countries largely unprepared. Inadequate reception conditions, lack of assistance upon arrival or access to basic services, prompted the need for a humanitarian response. UNHCR and humanitarian partners promptly stepped up their operational to support the authorities to respond to the most urgent humanitarian and protection needs of refugees and migrants. UNHCR has continued to advocate for a comprehensive European response focused on saving lives, providing protection and facilitating solutions.

Circumstances changed drastically since March this year with a significant decrease in the number of refugees and migrants arriving through the eastern Mediterranean Sea route and people along the Western Balkans route and an increase of persons remaining in Greece. There are still unmet needs as living conditions in some sites remain below standards. There are also many refugees with specific needs that need assistance and support, including unaccompanied or separated children (UASC), pregnant or lactating women, the elderly, people with disabilities, as well as the sick and injured. At the same time, many people continue to transit irregularly through the Western Balkans and central Europe using smuggling networks exposing themselves to multiple risks.



Diana, a UNHCR protection officer, searches the crowd at the Berkasovo border, between Serbia and Croatia, for vulnerable people who need immediate help, including pregnant women, mothers with young children, the elderly and people with disabilities or serious illness. © UNHCR / M. Henley

MAIN GOALS OF UNHCR'S REPOSE

Against this background and within the framework of the Refugee Coordination Model, UNHCR, in coordination with partners, set out to provide support to governments and civil society of the countries affected by the emergency, assisting them to put in place a protection-centered response. UNHCR sought to avert the risk of a humanitarian catastrophe through the provision of targeted and prioritized assistance, with particular focus on persons with specific needs, by providing:

- Support improvement of reception conditions, in particular during winter months
- Provide targeted humanitarian assistance
- Establish identification and referral protection systems with particular focus on UASC and family reunification
- Ensure compliance with international refugee and human rights law including through the establishment of a permanent monitoring presence in key strategic border and transit points
- Strengthen national asylum systems and national protection mechanisms through advocacy and capacity building activities
- Encourage access to longer-term solutions including through the support of the EU-backed relocation scheme, the promotion of reinforced alternative legal pathways to protection, and effective integration
- Strengthen partnership and coordination within the humanitarian community and with governments to facilitate an efficient and coordinated response.

KEY CHALLENGES AND ACHIEVEMENTS IN A CHANGING CONTEXT

UNHCR's involvement in the emergency response in Europe required a swift step up of operations in countries where, until that moment, UNHCR predominantly had an advocacy role. As part of the response UNHCR mobilized 700 additional staff across 11 countries. UNHCR launched three separate appeals including one focused on winterization efforts and the interagency regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP), the latter jointly with IOM in January 2016. The RMRP was revised in June 2016 in light of the change in circumstances. It presents the planned activities of 60 partners and the financial requirements amount to USD 670 million for 2016.¹

The situation in Europe presented from the outset a set of challenges mostly related to providing protection and assistance to large numbers of people on the move, who in most cases were unwilling to seek asylum and even sometimes services in the country of arrival so as not to delay their onward movement. The continuously changing routes used by refugees and migrants, and various, ad hoc border practices implemented by States, necessitated constant adaptation and shifting of resources. This also required the development and implementation of innovative practices, effective coordination within the framework of the Refugee Coordination Model, and adjustments given the presence of multiple and in many cases non-traditional actors. Furthermore, unilateral and fragmented actions by States added to the complexity of the situation and the response. Throughout Europe volunteers have provided invaluable support and assistance to refugees, also helping to build a welcoming environment. On a positive note, there were countless expressions of solidarity across Europe from individuals, private enterprises, non-profit organizations, and religious institutions. On the other hand, a rise of intolerance in the public discourse in many countries in Europe, leading to discrimination and, at times, violence, and increasingly restrictive legislation and limiting access to territory and to national asylum systems were worrying developments requiring coordinated strategic advocacy.

¹ To access the RMRP: <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/regional.php>

TARGETED ASSISTANCE AND A PROTECTION CENTERED APPROACH

A PROTECTION CENTERED RESPONSE

UNHCR developed a regional protection strategy for people on the move supported by a protection checklist to monitor its implementation and guide partners and local authorities in their efforts to implement a protection-centered emergency response. Beginning in August 2015, UNHCR was able to establish a 24/7 presence at key border and transit points, including in reception centres, on the Greek islands and mainland, and along the Western Balkan route. UNHCR staff working in these sites regularly provided key information (including on legal assistance and asylum), prevented family separation, facilitated family reunification, defused tensions between refugee groups and between refugees and other actors, and identified a large number of cases of individuals with specific needs, who were referred for assistance. Some of the support and referrals for individuals included medical assistance, provision of mobility devices for those with physical disabilities, construction of safe spaces for women and UASC, and psychosocial counselling. Real time reporting and movement tracking tools were also adopted.

▼ Ghulam Ali Jaffari, his wife Nabila, and their 2-year-old son Amir talk with UNHCR staff while waiting to collect their newly issued ID's by the Greek Asylum Service. © UNHCR / A. Zavallis



▲ Families receive assistance at Blue dot in Vojvodina reception centre. © UNHCR

THE BLUE DOT

One of the most significant innovative approaches was the establishment of Children and Family Support Hubs, designed in coordination with UNICEF and ICRC to assemble a minimum set of services in close physical proximity and under one neutral logo – the Blue Dot. The services includes restoring family links, a child friendly space and a dedicated mother and baby/toddler spaces, private rooms for counselling, psychosocial first aid, legal counselling, safe spaces for women and children to sleep, and an information desk with free WIFI accessibility. Before the closure of the border between Greece and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, 5 Blue Dots were established and operational in key entry points along the route, such as on Lesbos, in Eidomeni, and Geveçilja. Currently three are operational and four more will soon be functional on the Greek mainland and we are looking to establish them elsewhere in Europe. A significant number of families were separated along the different stages of the journey every day. UNHCR, together with partners identified separated family members and reunited hundreds of family members.

IMPROVING RECEPTION AND PROVISION OF BASIC ASSISTANCE

Through interagency efforts, emergency shelter and WASH facilities were provided for more than 20,000 places across the route in 35 locations. The quality and type of accommodation varied across the route; most shelter was designed for short-term occupancy consisting of emergency shelters, large tents and to a lesser extent repurposed buildings. UNHCR supported national authorities and NGOs in the management of sites and communal facilities serving as reception centres and short-term accommodation. In order to create a stock of NFIs and an effective storage and distribution system, procurement/supply units were established in all countries along the route and 15 national warehouses and two regional stockpiles were established. In addition to local procurement, a regional procurement process particularly focusing on winterization items was launched with the signing of 37 frame Agreements with vendors from 10 different countries.

WINTERIZATION RESPONSE

With the onset of winter, efforts were undertaken to winterize shelter and reception facilities and provide winter non-food items (NFIs). Winterization of water and sanitation facilities focused on insulation of water supply pipelines, pumps tanks and reservoirs to avoid freezing as well as provision of adequate heated structures for all water and sanitation points. UNHCR worked with national and local authorities, Red Cross organizations and local volunteer networks to meet any gap in the provision of hot food and hot drinks at key arrival locations and reception centres. On Lesvos in Greece and in Serbia, UNHCR provided transportation to reception centres to expedite access by refugees and asylum-seekers to assistance and protection services, while reducing their exposure to the elements, as an interim measure, when government authorities or other partners were not in a position to provide alternative arrangements.

✓ Gabriel (not his real name) receives assistance at the medical unit at Presevo reception centre in Serbia. Refugees and migrants must pass through Presevo to register. They also receive clothing, food and medical treatment. © UNHCR / M. Henley

MEDICAL ASSISTANCE

Medical assistance was made available to all refugees and migrants in the reception and asylum with over 200,000 consultations provided by a number of different governmental bodies and non-governmental organizations and partners.



COMMUNICATION WITH COMMUNITIES

As people made their way across Europe, through Greece and along the Western Balkan Route, the rapid speed at which they transited from one country to the next presented significant challenges to UNHCR's ability to effectively communicate with them for the purpose of identifying needs and providing information on the legal options and services available to them. Further, the frequently changing legal situation and processes made it especially difficult to communicate necessary information. UNHCR provided information at key transit and reception centres, which also allowed for the identification of protection and information needs to be able to adapt our response. Information sessions on asylum, relocation, and family reunification were conducted in Greece; this was accompanied by the distribution of printed materials in different languages. In the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia information was also disseminated over loudspeakers and TV screens in the Vinojug reception centre. A tablet-based tool to obtain feedback from refugees and migrants was developed and utilized at the Blue Dots. In the brief time it was utilized, feedback on access to services was collected.

Internet connectivity was provided with partners at reception centres on the islands in Greece and in reception centres along the Western Balkan Route, including in the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Serbia, allowing greater access to web-based information and communication with families at home and in destination countries.



UNHCR staff giving information to refugees and migrants at the temporary accommodation site in Souda.
© UNHCR / Y. Kyvernitis

LEGAL COUNSELLING

UNHCR also prioritized access to legal services and legal counselling for refugees and migrants at key locations along the transit route. UNHCR and partner organizations provided both group and individual legal counselling services to new arrivals on the Greek islands and at land border crossings, at reception centres along the Western Balkans route, and in other locations frequented by refugees and migrants on the move (city centres, public parks, etc.). In some cases, in critical transit points, legal assistance was available 24/7.

UNHCR and partners also provided systematic legal assistance to individuals in detention and in removal centres throughout Greece and the Western Balkans. Services provided generally included group information sessions on accessing national asylum systems, individual assistance to file asylum applications, and provided legal information on other critical areas of concern, like family reunification, and the EU relocation process.

USING TECHNOLOGY TO INCREASE COORDINATION AND FACILITATE QUICKER RESPONSE

Mobile phone hotlines were used to link field team-leaders across borders on a 24/7 basis. Cross-border WhatsApp Groups became important to immediately alert field teams on the numbers and nature of expected movements, including timing of arrival. WhatsApp Groups were particularly useful to inform the next arrival point about persons in need of specific support and to reunite families that were separated across borders. Alert messages were also sent to regulate the flow if reception capacities were already exhausted.



Naasan, a Syrian refugee, clings to his four-year-old son, Muhamad. He and his wife lost the boy in a crowd at the border between Serbia and Croatia. It took four days, but UNHCR and Red Cross staff on both sides of the border worked together to reunite the boy with his parents. © UNHCR / M. Henley



*“ By seeing us they feel secure.
They feel protected, because this is the unknown.
They feel that because UNHCR is around.”*

Hana Zabalawi, Protection Officer. Hana Zabalawi was a refugee herself, but now she's on the other side. In the pouring rain she offers hope to people with deeply uncertain futures.

UNHCR'S CALLS FOR URGENT AND COLLECTIVE ACTION **TO SAVE LIVES**

UNHCR's emergency response should be seen within the larger context of UNHCR's call for urgent and concerted action in response to the increased number of refugees and migrants arriving by sea, with the overall objective of saving lives. After the tragic events of the coast of Lampedusa in 2013 UNHCR launched the Central Mediterranean Sea initiative (CMSI), based on solidarity, responsibility-sharing and protection to those fleeing persecution and violence, calling to:

- Ensure that the long-established tradition of rescue at sea is upheld.
- Enhance reception facilities, with particular attention to those with specific needs.
- Ensure access to fair and efficient asylum procedures.
- Ensure access to durable solutions for persons found to be in need of international protection.
- Provide support for the timely return in safety and dignity of those found not to be in need of international protection, including reintegration support.
- Increase safe pathways as alternatives to irregular dangerous movements. These could include increasing resettlement and access to humanitarian visas, but also family reunification, private sponsorship schemes, and student and employment visa programmes.
- Addressing root causes of forced displacement and continue to support relief and development programmes to address humanitarian, human rights and development needs.