



# Urgent Action Needed on Refugee Crisis in Europe

IRC Situational Briefing – 13 October 2016

*A long-term refugee crisis, with thousands stranded in substandard camps, has unfolded on European soil. On the Greek islands, 14,331 men, women and children await possible return to Turkey and the Greek Government reports 60,788 people of concern across the country. With increased border restrictions, some 6,000<sup>1</sup> refugees are now in Serbia, stretching the capacities of accommodation facilities. Close to 1,000 people are sleeping rough in the capital or at the two transit zones on the border with Hungary while the weather is turning increasingly colder.*

*The refugee crisis is part of a new global norm, in which unusually large numbers of people are displaced for longer than ever before, and where the disparity between their needs and provision is growing by the week. Europe's first priority must be to meet the humanitarian needs of refugees who have already arrived, and to process their asylum claims, family reunion and relocation transfers quickly. Denied safe pathways into Europe, significantly more refugees are risking their lives by travelling via smuggling routes through the Balkans. Elsewhere in Europe, desperate people also continue to make the dangerous sea voyage from Libya to Italy.*

*The proposed Union Resettlement Scheme represents a major opportunity for the EU to step up to its global responsibilities. An immediate increase in resettlement efforts is required to offer safe routes of entry for those seeking sanctuary, alongside a robust and humane system to receive spontaneous arrivals. The UN estimates that 10% of the global refugee population - the most vulnerable - need resettlement. The IRC calculates that the European share is a minimum of 540,000 over the next five years, or 108,000 per year.*

## Urgent action is needed in three areas:

- 1. Accelerate relocation and family reunification from Greece and Serbia**
- 2. Immediately address substandard living conditions and provide safe and appropriate accommodation**
- 3. Ensure the safety and security of unaccompanied children in Greece and the Balkans**

### 1. Accelerate relocation and family reunification from Greece and Serbia

- (a) European states must rapidly increase the transfer of refugees from Greece to other European countries. There are currently two main options for doing so: accelerated relocation and family reunification. In addition, EU states should quickly facilitate the transfer of the most vulnerable into more sustainable situations.
- (b) To assist with this, establish and deploy an Asylum Task Force of 1,250 people, including 500 asylum officials and 500 interpreters to get the processing of asylum, family reunion and relocation claims processed, and 250 lawyers to ensure that refugees can access the advice they need to navigate the applications process.
- (c) Despite EU Member State commitments in 2015 to **relocate** 160,000 refugees from Italy and Greece to other countries across Europe, only 5,871 refugees have been relocated to date, including only 4,603 from Greece.<sup>2</sup> In light of the current acute humanitarian needs in Greece, this is severely inadequate. The Greek authorities, EU Member States and EU agencies should heed targets set by the European Commission on 19 March to work toward achieving 6,000 relocations per month and reaching the target of at least 20,000 that had been announced as the goal by mid-May.<sup>3</sup>
- (d) EU Member States should remove barriers to rapid processing, such as long lists of preferences for those accepted for relocation and the layering of security checks, which are presently repetitive and time-consuming.
- (e) In Greece, IRC teams indicate that thousands are attempting to reach family elsewhere in Europe. UNHCR assessments of arrivals into Greece in May 2016 indicated that approximately 45 percent of Syrians and 32 percent of Afghans, respectively, are trying to reach family elsewhere in Europe.<sup>4</sup> **Family unity** transfers under the Dublin III Regulation must therefore be made to work effectively.
- (f) In Serbia, thousands of refugees are on a so-called waiting list to legally access the Hungarian asylum procedure. Hungary is accepting just 30 refugees per day. At this speed, IRC's partners estimate that some refugees on this list would have to wait until the spring of 2018 to leave Serbia. Hungary should significantly speed up the processing of these requests.

<sup>1</sup> UNHCR Serbia Update 6-9 October

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR, EU Emergency Relocation Mechanism, as of 5 October 2016. <http://data.unhcr.org/Mediterranean>

<sup>3</sup> European Commission, EU-Turkey Agreement Questions and Answers, 19 March 2016 [http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_MEMO-16-963\\_en.htm](http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_MEMO-16-963_en.htm)

<sup>4</sup> UNHCR, Questionnaire findings for Syrians in Greece, May 2016, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=1727> and UNHCR, Questionnaire findings for Afghans in Greece, May 2016, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=1728>

- (g) Many refugees and asylum-seekers in Serbia have family in EU Member States. Family reunification processes may last from six months to two years, depending on the practice of the state of destination. EU Member States should accelerate family reunification for these people and facilitate the transfer of the most vulnerable into more sustainable situations.
- (h) Finally, thousands of those currently in Greece are considered particularly **vulnerable**. In 2016 alone, 3,779 unaccompanied children have arrived and been identified in a country under-equipped to offer adequate support.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, UNHCR assessments of arrivals into Greece in May 2016 indicated eight percent of Afghans were part of a single female-headed household and 20 percent of Syrians either had a physical disability or a severe medical condition.<sup>6</sup> European states should therefore also create fast-track pathways to protection for the most vulnerable groups. This could include EU Member States establishing bilateral agreements with Greece for transfer of those identified as most vulnerable.

### The IRC's humanitarian work in Europe

In addition to providing urgent humanitarian assistance to people in need and refugees in Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Iraq, the IRC has staff working in Greece, Serbia and Germany. The IRC is working on mainland Greece and the island of Lesbos to provide clean water and sanitation, up-to-date information, financial assistance to meet basic needs, and specialised protection services to the most vulnerable, including women and children. In Serbia, we are supporting local organisations to provide basic humanitarian aid and information to refugees, psychosocial support, and specialised protection services to the most vulnerable, including women and children. Finally, we are planning to provide technical assistance on refugee integration from our office in Germany.

## 2. Immediately address substandard living conditions and provide safe and appropriate accommodation

- (a) Safe and appropriate accommodation should be provided for the 1,586 unaccompanied children in Greece including the 376 children currently in detention centres and closed facilities. In the next three months, safe and appropriate accommodation, in houses and apartments rather than tents, must also be identified for all refugees in Greece.
- (b) It is unacceptable that European policy has created a situation in which thousands in **Greece** – nearly two thirds of whom are women and children<sup>7</sup> – are living in substandard camps on European soil. Unless European states take action now, this will become a long-term refugee crisis, with thousands living in camps for extended periods. Insufficient living conditions, a lack of information, and an inadequate asylum system constitute a deeply concerning combination for thousands fleeing violence and persecution, which has led to rising levels of frustration and anxiety among refugees.
- (c) The IRC and other agencies, including UNHCR<sup>8</sup>, have raised concerns regarding the substandard conditions in several sites in northern Greece. Some sites are located in isolated industrial zones and warehouses, are overcrowded, with very limited access to essential health, sanitation, protection services and information. On the Greek islands, thousands continue to be held at former hotspot facilities, often in concerning living conditions, with their future uncertain.
- (d) There must be a co-ordinated approach between the Greek Government, NGOs, and EU and UN agencies to ensure living conditions are improved, particularly for the fast-approaching winter, and essential services provided quickly. Minimum humanitarian standards must be adhered to, including standards across all sectors to mitigate gender-based violence and reduce women's and girls' risk of abuse and exploitation.
- (e) In **Serbia**, there are 200 people currently at the Hungarian border waiting for the opportunity to cross into Hungary – two thirds of whom are women and children from Syria, Afghanistan or Iraq.<sup>9</sup> Unaccompanied children are not permitted to cross, pressuring many unaccompanied adolescents to identify themselves as adults. Approximately 30 people are permitted to cross into Hungary each day, however the current process to register and prioritise individuals to cross lacks transparency and the process of the "waiting list" management is poorly understood.
- (f) Services such as waste management and medical access in the transit zones have improved, however there are escalating concerns about the long-term capacity and sustainability of current accommodation options for refugees, given the longer periods that refugees stay in country. According to UNHCR, there are approximately 5,800 refugees and asylum-seekers estimated to be in Serbia, of which over 5,048 (about 87 percent) are accommodated in government facilities. While the maximum capacity of these facilities is 4,980, only 2,508 of these spaces are viable shelter solutions for longer term stays – current occupancy is over 5,000, creating overcrowding.
- (g) Reports of pushbacks of refugees across the Hungarian border, including those who were identified beyond eight kilometres of the border with Serbia, have increased, with refugees describing increasingly violent use of

<sup>5</sup> EKKA. 3,779 unaccompanied children have been identified and registered for safe accommodation between 1 January and 19 September 2016.

<sup>6</sup> UNHCR, Questionnaire findings for Syrians in Greece, May 2016, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=1727>, and UNHCR, Questionnaire findings for Afghans in Greece, May 2016, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=1728>

<sup>7</sup> UNHCR, Refugees/Migrants Emergency Response – Mediterranean Data Portal, accessed 22 July 2016, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/country.php?id=83> It is estimated that 38 percent those arriving to Greece since 1 Jan 2016 are children and 21 percent women.

<sup>8</sup> UNHCR, 27 May 2016, <http://www.unhcr.org/uk/news/briefing/2016/5/57480cb89/greece-unhcr-concerned-conditions-new-refugee-sites-urges-alternatives.html>

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR, Serbia Update, 2-5 October 2016, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=1895>

force by Hungarian authorities.<sup>10</sup> Between 25 September and 2 October alone, 228 pushbacks of refugees were reported,<sup>11</sup> many of whom were forcibly returned to Serbia with serious injuries and reports of maltreatment and abuse. There are additionally reports of increased pushbacks from Croatia to Serbia as well as from Serbia to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia.

- 3. Ensure the safety and security of unaccompanied children in Greece and the Balkans** through immediate, safe and secure accommodation provisions and the fast processing of their asylum, family reunification and/or relocation applications to ensure they are placed in stable and secure environments as quickly as possible.
- (a) There are a significant number of unaccompanied children at risk in Greece and on the move through Serbia. In **Greece**, response mechanisms, government and NGOs are overstretched and unable to meet the growing need for safe accommodation and comprehensive services necessary to identify durable solutions.
  - (b) In 2016 alone, 3,779 unaccompanied children have been registered with the relevant Greek authority (the National Centre for Social Solidarity—E.K.K.A.) in need of safe accommodation and support. However, there are currently only 891 safe accommodation places available across the entire country, and they are all full. Efforts by UNHCR and NGOs are underway to create additional safe accommodation places, but they have not kept pace with the rapidly growing number of identified children in need.
  - (c) For example, 1,225 unaccompanied children were identified during the pre-registration process on mainland Greece in June and July.<sup>12</sup> As a result, the waiting list for safe accommodation has increased to 1,586 children. Until appropriate accommodation become available, 377 of these children are being held in detention and closed facilities - 371 in First Reception Centre facilities and 6 in police custody.<sup>13</sup>
  - (d) In **Serbia**, it is widely recognised that while 43 unaccompanied children expressed their intent to seek asylum in June,<sup>14</sup> many who have expressed interest in asylum will continue their journey further into Europe and many more continue to travel through the country without formally registering - in part to evade restrictions on crossing into Hungary and also to ensure the continuation of their journey via smugglers. In 2016, at least 380 unaccompanied children have been identified.
  - (e) The lack of a formal age assessment process in Serbia to validate the age of minors places children in a double jeopardy situation as they are placed in adult facilities with increased vulnerability to abuse and exploitation from adults, and are simultaneously excluded from child-centred services to respond to their unique needs. Within the Serbian legal framework, there is no distinction between asylum procedures for children and adults.
  - (f) There are only four shelter options in Serbia for unaccompanied children under 14, only one of which can accommodate children for prolonged stays: an institute for children with special needs in the North, a shelter in the South only available for short-term stays, and two longer term shelters in Belgrade which house unaccompanied children alongside Serbian children, in one institution including children in conflict with the law. There are no child-specific accommodations or sufficient services and support for unaccompanied children above 14, who are placed in asylum centres alongside adults. Additionally, there are no dedicated shelter solutions for girls.

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<sup>10</sup> Hungarian Helsinki Committee, "Hungary: Latest amendments 'legalise' extrajudicial push-back of asylum-seekers, in violation of EU and international law," 5 July 2016. The Hungarian Government has amended the Asylum Act and Act to State Borders to "allow the Hungarian police to push back any asylum seekers who are arrested within 8km (5 miles) of either the Serbian-Hungarian or the Croatian-Hungarian border to the external side of the border fence." <http://www.helsinki.hu/wp-content/uploads/HHC-info-update-push-backs-5-July-2016.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> UNHCR, Serbia Update, 2-5 October 2016, p1.

<sup>12</sup> UNHCR, Pre-Registration Data Analysis 9 June – 30 July 2016.

<sup>13</sup> EKKA, Situation Update: Unaccompanied Children in Greece, 19 September 2016.

<sup>14</sup> UNHCR, Serbia Update, 21 – 24 July 2016, <http://data.unhcr.org/mediterranean/download.php?id=1712>