

## Refugees and asylum seekers in Greece

Greece is a signatory state to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and a member of the Executive Committee of UNHCR (EXCOM), which currently comprises of 87 states.

As a country at the external borders of the European Union, significant numbers of third-country nationals, including refugees, arrive in Greece in mixed migratory movements every year, by land and by sea. According to official **statistics**, from January to June 2014 there were some 10,828 arrests in border areas with Turkey (10,080 at sea borders, noting a 139.60% increase in sea arrivals comparing to the same period of 2013 and 748 at land borders, namely Evros region, noting a 64.40% increase comparing to previous year's). Moreover, there is an increase in arrivals of Syrian refugees. During the same period, 4,858 asylum-applications were submitted at the Regional Asylum Offices, under the competence of the new Asylum Service.

Since 2010, Greece is in the process of implementing a major reform of its system of asylum and reception of new arrivals (first reception). The main objectives and actions of this reform are reflected in the “**Greek Action Plan on Asylum and Migration Management**”, which was revised in January 2013. UNHCR actively supported the efforts to reform the asylum and first reception systems in Greece and as of 2014 efforts are focused on the consolidation of the investment on this reform.

## UNHCR's partners in Greece

UNHCR in Greece works in cooperation with the Greek government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the media and civil society towards the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers. UNHCR's main governmental counterpart is the Greek Ministry of Public Order and Citizen Protection (MoPOCP) and its services, including the Asylum Service, Appeals Authority and First Reception Service. UNHCR also closely cooperates with the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Welfare, as well as with the Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Interior and the Ministry of Education. UNHCR also cooperates with the Greek Ombudsman, which is an independent state authority.

For 2014 UNHCR has concluded partnership agreements with MoPOCP, METAction, the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), 'Integration Centre for Migrant Workers - Ecumenical Refugee Programme' (KSPM-ERP), the Greek Council of Refugees (GCR), the Hellenic League for Human Rights (HLHR) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Greece. UNHCR and the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) jointly coordinate the 'Racist Violence Recording Network', which comprises 37 organizations and civil society actors as participants.

## UNHCR donors

Many of UNHCR's asylum reform support related activities currently benefit from funding from the European Commission (European Refugee Fund, External Borders Fund) and the UK Home Office. Funding has also been received from the Stavros Niarchos Foundation for non formal educational activities on human and refugee rights.

## United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Greece

UNHCR was established as a subsidiary organ of the General Assembly of the United Nations by way of a decision of the Assembly in December 1950. UNHCR in Greece was established in March 1952. Since January 2007, it operates as a UNHCR National Office, overseen by the UNHCR Regional Representation for Southern Europe in Rome. In 2014, the Office is implementing activities carried out by 13 staff-members, 5 UNOPS contractors and 36 affiliate workforce, engaged in asylum and first reception reform related activities.

## Main objectives and activities 2014

UNHCR's main operational focus in 2014 is the support to the operation of the **new asylum procedure** (regulated by PD 113/2013), including through the continued deployment of a team offering technical advice on legal aspects, quality assurance, information analysis, project management and communication, as well as country of origin information to the **Central Asylum Service**. In addition, a team deployed to the newly established **Regional Asylum Offices** - currently operational in 8 locations (Athens, Amygdaleza, Thessaloniki, Komotini, Alexandroupolis, Orestiada, Lesvos, Rhodes) continues to provide support to the incoming staff, including with quality assurance, case consultations and training to the case-workers. The **new administrative appeal instance** under the responsibility of the Appeals Authority is supported through the participation of members, indicated by UNHCR and NCHR, in the 19 three-member Appeals Committees, established in June 2013, in accordance with Law 3907/2011. After June, a decrease of the Appeals Committees is envisaged.

In order to accelerate the clearance of the **backlog of asylum appeals**, UNHCR continues its support to the operation of 20 Appeal and Special Committees under PD 114/2010. UNHCR indicated members participate in the appeals process, as one of the three voting members in the Appeal and Special Committees. Interpretation-services continue to be provided through UNHCR's partner METAction.

UNHCR engages, in close cooperation with MoPOCP and the First Reception Service, in efforts to strengthen the **first reception response to new arrivals**. UNHCR continues the deployment of teams to selected border locations, namely to the Evros region, the islands of the Aegean (Lesvos, Samos, Chios) and the Dodecanese to support first reception procedures and provide information on rights and obligations, interpretation services, through its partner METAction, as well as Non Food Items to new arrivals.

Moreover, UNHCR continues to provide technical assistance to the First Reception Service so as to strengthen the response to new arrivals.

Efforts to provide technical, legal and practical advice in the area of **reception** of asylum-seekers, including unaccompanied or separated children (UASC), are further enhanced, in working closely with the competent authorities, on aspects related to effective guardianship-systems, identification and referrals as well as on best interests assessment. UNHCR continues to be engaged in monitoring reception facilities, in improving coordination with reception service providers (mainly NGOs) and in providing technical support on developing and adopting Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), referral mechanisms and aspects related to the strategy on reception.

UNHCR continues to support the provision of legal aid through its partners GCR and KSPM-ERP. Priority are persons of concern to UNHCR in **detention** and the support to **unaccompanied or separated children**, through legal assistance, including for family-reunification aid. For the second half of 2014 UNHCR is planning the provision of exceptional targeted support to vulnerable cases of Syrian asylum seekers.

UNHCR provides technical assistance to MoPOCP within the framework of the multiannual planning of its activities under the Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (2014-2020).

Efforts to counter **racism and xenophobia**, including through the 'Racist Violence Recording Network' continue throughout 2014.

UNHCR is also collaborating with IOM for a project on Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration, aiming to the provision of thorough information prior to departure.

## UNHCR's support to the reform of the Greek asylum and first reception system

Since 2010, UNHCR has supported efforts of Greece to reform its asylum system. Relevant areas of intervention are activities foreseen by the respective laws regulating the asylum-procedure, including during a transitional phase, and by offering technical, legal and practical support in the preparations and start of operations of the new Asylum Service, Appeals Authority and First Reception Service, which were established by Law 3907/2011.

**Support to the Central Asylum Service, Regional Asylum Offices and Appeals Authority:** In close consultation with the Director of the Asylum Service, UNHCR continues to deploy 5 Associate Asylum Officers to the Central Asylum Service to provide technical support during the operation of the new asylum procedure. This support includes the drafting of necessary rules, manuals as well as practical and technical tools, including on aspects related to registration, case-management, project submissions, budget, communication services as well as capacity-building and training. In addition, a Country of Origin Information (COI) team, comprising of 2 Documentation Officers and 1 Translator, continue to receive and respond to queries by asylum case-workers in first and second instance, and translate selected COI documents into Greek to assist the Greek asylum authorities to compile updated country of origin information. In early 2013 the COI team moved to the premises of the Central Asylum Service to support both the Asylum Service, as well as the Appeals Committees (backlog and new Committees) with country of origin information, including in the Greek language. Since April 2011, a total of 452 requests for country of origin information were responded to, covering 54 countries of origin (in particular Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, Syria, Georgia, Nigeria, Iraq and Sudan).

Since the start of operations of the new asylum procedure (June 2013) until end of June 2014, the team of 10 Associate Asylum Officers deployed to the Regional Asylum Offices, including to support quality assurance, has observed 679 asylum interviews and engaged in 7,881 case consultations with case-workers and reviewed 534 decisions. A Memorandum of Cooperation between the Asylum Service and UNHCR, detailing the cooperation, was signed on 16 July 2013. UNHCR has provided induction training on refugee law and basic skills to the members of the new Appeals Committees, who receive further UNHCR guidance and support through regular coordination meetings. As of end of June 2014, the UNHCR indicated members have participated in the examination of 2,097 appeals.

**Appeals Backlog Clearance Strategy:** In efforts to enhance the capacity to process and clear the significant backlog of appeals in asylum-cases and with the support of UNHCR, the number of Appeals and Special Committees was doubled. As of June 2013, 20 Appeals and Special Committees started operating in three refurbished and well equipped premises in Athens (Vyronas, Patisia and Galatsi), examining appeals against first instance decisions prior to the start of operations of the Asylum Service and Appeals Authority. Focusing on appeals against more recent first instance decisions, particularly of asylum-seekers in pre-removal detention centers. UNHCR indicated members of the backlog committees have participated in the review of a total of 8,798 cases, including 3,182 interviews, until end of June 2014. UNHCR works closely with the Coordinator, appointed by the Minister of Public Order and Citizen Protection, who is responsible to manage and oversee the backlog clearance. In addition, UNHCR supports the provision of interpretation services during the transitional period, through its partner METAction.

**First Reception of new arrivals:** In its effort to strengthen the first reception response to new arrivals, from 1 April 2013 to 30 June 2014, a total of 18,044 new arrivals (including 14,839 men and 3,205 women), mainly from Syria, Afghanistan and Somalia, have received information on rights and obligations in a language they understand, by a team of 10 Associate Information Officers, deployed to the most commonly used entry points to Greece (Evros, Lesvos, Chios, Samos, Dodecanese), supported by 2 Legal Coordinators in Athens and assisted by interpreters of METAction. Numerous ad hoc missions have been organised and carried out, in less than 72 hours after landings of new arrivals, to islands of the Aegean and the Dodecanese not otherwise covered by a regular UNHCR presence (inter alia Limnos, Icaria, Leros, Kos, Kalymnos, Symi, Tilos, Crete), as well as Peloponnese. In addition, UNHCR activities supported the identification of persons with specific needs, including families, unaccompanied or separated children, persons with traumatic experiences, in cooperation with competent authorities, and their referral to appropriate structures. Moreover, from September 2013 to June 2014 more than 6,100 Non Food Items (NFIs), consisting of sleeping bags and hygiene kits, have been distributed to new arrivals. On 5 July 2013, a Memorandum of Cooperation was concluded between the Ministry of Public Order and Citizen Protection and UNHCR to ensure effective cooperation with regard to new arrivals at local and central level. During the second half of 2014 UNHCR's border support will also be focused to new arrivals from Syria, which are constantly increasing.

## Public Information

The UNHCR Office in Greece provides swift and reliable information about the situation of refugees in Greece and around the world and answers questions about the work of UNHCR through media, UNHCR publications and audio-visual material, its Greek website and its social media pages.

UNHCR is actively involved in efforts to address xenophobia and racist violence. In this framework, UNHCR launched the campaign "1 victim of racist violence is too many!" at the center of which is the web platform [www.1againstracism.gr](http://www.1againstracism.gr) hosting articles, videos, interviews and testimonies. Moreover, in cooperation with the Youth Awareness Committee, members of which include the Ministry of Education, the General Secretariat of Youth, teachers' unions and the University of Athens, efforts are being made to sensitize youth about refugees through publications, special events and an annual student contest first launched in 1994. Educational programmes are also taking place at schools, targeting teachers and students, through seminars and workshops based on interactive and non-formal educational tools, such as "Passages" game simulating the life of a refugee. Moreover, the new digital platform ([www.unhcr.gr/refugeestories](http://www.unhcr.gr/refugeestories)) with stories of refugees in Greece, or who have transited through this country, highlights the human stories behind statistics. Every year, on World Refugee Day, June 20, UNHCR commemorates the strength and resilience of the millions of people around the world forced to flee their homes due to war or persecution. This year's campaign will continue to emphasize the impact of war on families and place individual refugee family stories at the centre of UNHCR's work, reminding that even "1 family torn apart by war is too many" ([www.unhcr.gr/1family](http://www.unhcr.gr/1family)).

## UNHCR Greece Websites and Social Media Accounts

-  [www.unhcr.gr](http://www.unhcr.gr)
-  [facebook.com/unhcrgreece](https://facebook.com/unhcrgreece)
-  [twitter.com/unhcrgreece](https://twitter.com/unhcrgreece)
-  [youtube.com/unhcrgreece](https://youtube.com/unhcrgreece)

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