



MIGRATION NEWSLETTER

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Special Issue

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This Special Issue of the Migration Newsletter is dedicated to the
World Refugee Day - June 20, 2018

GETTING ACQUAINTED WITH...

In this special issue of Migration Newsletter we present our interview with Regional Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in the South Caucasus Mr. Johannes Van Der Klaauw



During recent years there were significant developments in the asylum and refugee field in Armenia. A new Law on Asylum entered into force since January 2016. Development of asylum system in Armenia has been progressed during past years and current integration policy of refugees is underway to complement this system,

the new accommodation centre for asylum seekers is planned to be built in the near future. What is your view on all above-mentioned developments in Armenia? What needs to be done for further improvement? And how do you see the UNHCR support in construction of new accommodation centre?

Indeed Armenia has made important progress in developing a fair and effective asylum process over the last years. Similar as is the case for neighbouring countries, Armenia is gradually becoming a country of destination for a growing number of asylum seekers and refugees from the Middle-East or from countries farther away in Asia and Africa. The 2016 asylum law can be considered as by and large in line with international and European standards, and the State Migration Service (SMS) is fully operational and has been instrumental in putting in place a quality refugee status determination process. The courts have assumed their responsibility in asylum matters which has resulted of late in some precedent setting rulings on for instance asylum claims based on religious persecution. The asylum decision-taking process, however, is not immune from national security considerations: the geopolitical situation of the country, the unresolved Nagorno-Karabakh con 1

fluct and the closure of the country's borders with Azerbaijan and Turkey do generate security concerns and impact on asylum decisions. Legitimate security concerns must be addressed in a manner compatible with international refugee and human rights law. UNHCR continues to benefit from an excellent relationship with the Armenian authorities in asylum matters, first and foremost with the Head and the staff of the SMS. This allows the Office to provide continued training and coaching for SMS staff, to offer legal advice and relevant country of origin information and monitor the various stages of asylum decision taking, including at the level of the courts. UNHCR also partners with the Human Rights Defender and his Office on advocacy matters, including legislative initiatives, training and prison monitoring while the Public Defender's team also provides free legal aid together with lawyers of the NGO Mission Armenia. UNHCR has regular exchanges with all relevant authorities responsible for asylum matters: in addition to the SMS and the courts, these are the security service, border police and law enforcement officials to discuss issues related to access to territory and border management, access to the asylum process, treatment of sensitive cases involving national security considerations, and grounds for or exclusion from refugee status. We would hope that the asylum process can be made ever more efficient and effective as currently some asylum seekers have to wait for many months if not years before a final decision on their case is taken. There is a need to prioritize the treatment of some cases, particularly those with a manifestly well-founded fear of persecution and obvious need for protection. We hope the authorities and the judiciary will further invest resources in the asylum process. We also hope that all asylum seekers can benefit from a fair and efficient process irrespective of their geographical, religious, ethnic or social background. We wish the authorities to avoid penalisation of irregular entry on the territory if such entry is sought for asylum-related reasons. Too often in such situations persons are being arrested and charged in court resulting in long prison sentences whereas their only wish is to seek asylum in Armenia. The Government has rightly identified the need for improving the reception conditions for asylum seekers in the country. UNHCR considers the intended construction of a new reception facility (for which, the Government has provided the land, while ICMPD has developed a concrete design as a basis for systematic out

reach to donors in search of funding) as a significant measure to further improve the treatment of asylum seekers, and UNHCR is committed to contribute to the provision of furniture and equipment in the centre. It also hopes potential donors will contribute to this important project. Once ready this facility is expected to meet all of today's standards and requirements for dignified reception conditions including the provision or referral to various services. UNHCR believes this to be an overdue but very positive step taken by the Government and is looking forward to the early opening of the facility. It is currently trying to identify donor funds to be made available for the (completion of the) construction of the facility. In regard to the integration of recognized refugees, the Armenian authorities and host society, including UNHCR's partners, have shown outstanding support to persons displaced due to the conflict in Syria, primarily of Armenian background who have arrived in many thousands over the last years. UNHCR and its partners have worked tirelessly in support of the Government's measures to sustain the integration of these refugees in Armenia. The refugees themselves have often come with various assets, talents and skills notably in the business sectors of ICT, tourism, food and the arts. Their host communities have contributed by sharing resources and helping them to find accommodation and assisting them in accessing public services. The Government has taken important steps to reduce tax burdens for entrepreneurs, recognize the economic potential of the refugees, support the creation of new economic sectors such as tourism in which the refugees can bring their expertise and experience to fruition. However, we have seen very destitute families arriving too, who need continued financial, social and economic support. Importantly the Government has not been able so far to provide Syrian-Armenian refugees with durable housing. UNHCR and its partners continue to identify and provide for rental subsidy schemes, bearing in mind that refugees of non-Armenian background are equally in need of such support. The former Minister for the Diaspora has been actively working on a comprehensive integration strategy for the ethnic Syrian-Armenian refugee community to which UNHCR and diaspora organisations have contributed significantly. UNHCR hopes that this strategy will be approved by the new Government, that it also takes into account the refugee integration strategy previously developed by the SMS, and that the strategy ultimately will be applicable to all refugees.



The expertise and resources of development agencies are to be increasingly sought to put this strategy into action and bring the socio-economic integration process for all refugees - irrespective of their national, ethnic or religious background - to a successful completion, noting that integration is a two way process also requiring a contribution from the refugees themselves.

Taking into consideration the turbulent situation in the Middle East region and its proximity to South Caucasus how do you think it will influence the migration dynamics in South Caucasus? What are the measures that the governments in the region should first of all take into account?

In today's world we are witnessing unprecedented levels of forced displacement as a result of ongoing and widespread conflicts, not only in the Middle Eastern region but also on all other continents. New conflicts emerge while older conflicts persist and seem not to be solvable through negotiated settlements as we witness in the case of Syria, Ukraine, Afghanistan, Yemen, South Sudan - to mention just few. Respect for the principles of international humanitarian law and human rights law is in today's world lower than it has been for a long time. Armenia and the South Caucasus region are located in the proximity of conflict regions (Syria, Iraq) or close to major mixed migratory routes (through Iran and Turkey). Armenia and its neighbouring countries need to capacitate themselves to manage these movements in so far they affect their borders and territories, by ensuring that all those in need of protection find safety on their territories and receive the protection they need, while movements of migrants in search of a better life are managed with the stability and security of the country borne in mind. In protecting their borders and territory the countries of the South Caucasus, like elsewhere, should keep the door open for all those who have fled persecution, gross violations of human rights, ethnic conflict and civil war. Protection sensitive entry systems and migration policies should integrate the various groups on the move, and develop different responses to different needs of people in these so-called mixed movements. This also means that the countries of the South Caucasus should ensure that any security concerns they may have with the arrival of asylum seekers originating from countries known for jihadism and militant extremism will not trump their protection obligations. Unfortunately we see in the region a tendency towards rejecting asylum applications based on national security concerns without properly applying criteria and procedures for refugee status determination. Based on classified security information, asylum applications are being rejected while a proper application of international refugee law provisions would have led to recognition as refugee. It should be recalled that international refugee law provides for safeguards and mechanisms to protect those fleeing persecution, conflict and violence while bearing in mind the security of host countries and their communities. Security and protection need to go hand in hand – the one is not possible without the other. Separating security from protection ends up doing a disservice to both: when asylum seekers with a well-founded fear of persecution are not given the protection they need, they move onward and may end up in smuggling

and trafficking rings, while those who may be a danger to national security and the society end up without a status in an irregular situation while they can also not be returned. UNHCR therefore advises states to take an integrated approach to security and protection, which also means that irregular entry, without the required documents, should not be penalized if the person arriving expresses a desire to seek asylum. Too often in such situations asylum seekers are charged for irregular border crossing and are being detained for protracted periods of time. States can also apply the exclusion clauses and exceptions to the non-*refoulement* principle as laid down in international refugee law and which take full account of the security interests of States and host communities. Efforts to ensure the security of host countries as well as the protection of refugees not only need to be taken at the point of entry but also after arrival: sustainable integration programs involving refugees and host communities alike can help to counter any possible threats arising from radicalisation on the one hand, and populist and toxic public debates on refugees and foreigners on the other.

Since the start of Syrian conflict, Armenia has welcomed the third largest number of Syrian refugees as a proportion of total population. Integration of Syrian refugees in Armenia on one hand is challenging and on the other hand can be considered as a good example of successful integration. UNHCR plays a great role in this process standing next to the Armenian Government to help refugees create new life in Armenia. How do you foresee further support to Syrian refugees by the UNHCR in Armenia?

The integration of thousands of ethnic Armenian Syrian refugees in Armenian society over the last years has been the result of a very successful cooperation between various branches of the Government, development actors such as the European, US, German and Austrian development funds and agencies, diaspora organisations such as AGBU and the IDEA Foundation, international financial institutions, civil society, NGO services providers and the refugees themselves, who have created associations and businesses. Platforms for public and private sector cooperation in economic integration have been established, business networks and value chains have integrated the potential of the refugees and vocational qualification and training schemes have been adapted to cater for the needs of the refugees. In order to further the process UNHCR, on the basis of a regional initiative, has hired the services of a consultant to develop the UNHCR contribution to the next stages of this integration process, notably in the economic development and integration sector, and to inform further engagement by partners. The needs to be supported however are still considerable, notably in finding affordable and durable accommodation and access to decent work, quality education and health care. UNHCR will

continue to promote the engagement of development and diaspora actors as well as international financial institutions in the socio-economic integration of refugees, and will not limit this to the ethnic Armenian refugees from Syria, but to all refugees. It will continue advocating for the inclusion of refugees and displaced populations in national development strategies and plans, notably the Armenia Development Strategy for 2030, also by highlighting the contribution of refugees and the need to include them in planning and implementation of the strategy. UNHCR will support the new Government in the finalization of the comprehensive strategy on the integration of persons displaced from Syria and hopes it will be applicable to all refugees, acknowledging the Ministry for Diaspora will be in the lead. The results of the socio-economic consultancy which UNHCR commissioned earlier this year should inform the strategy and its subsequent action plans. UNHCR will also support activities by NGO service providers such as vocational training, including training on 'how to do business in Armenia' and provision of microfinancing and livelihood grants. Together with UNDP and UNIDO it will support improved market access for refugee entrepre-



neurs as well as job matching efforts. Beyond the economic dimension of integration UNHCR and its partners will focus on the social and cultural aspects notably in reaching out to the refugee youth. This includes empowering youth through meaningful engagement, and supporting youth' physical and emotional well-being. Youth see things differently and it is critical to understand things from their perspective. Youth can identify other youth who are struggling, and they can reach those who are hard for other actors to reach. We have seen recently during the momentous times of change in the country the critical role played by youth, including refugee youth, who have high expectations of the new administration. Other areas of specific attention to the integration of refugees, including ethnic Armenian Syrian refugees, are the accessibility and affordability of quality health care where public services are lacking including for the most vulnerable such as elderly, disabled and children, and most importantly the provision of durable housing solutions including social housing projects or subsidized housing credit schemes, as the identification of decent accommodation for refugees, notably larger families, remains a key challenge.

In the light of newly adopted Sustainable Development Goals what are the top priorities of UNHCR Regional Office and what projects it plans to implement in the near future? In your opinion what are the biggest challenges that the Regional Representation of UNHCR faces today?

The Regional Representation in the South Caucasus provides support to the UNHCR's operations in the region, including in Armenia, to ensure that refugees and other displaced persons receive protection and can access durable solutions in line with international standards and in partnership with all stakeholders concerned. UNHCR's approach to the displacement challenges in the region of today is harmonized with the efforts of other UN agencies as set out in the United Nations Partnership for Sustainable Development Agenda and the Government program for the nationalization of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals in each of the three countries in the South Caucasus. These aim inter alia at a smooth transition from humanitarian interventions to a broader development response, inclusive of refugees, stateless persons, and other groups of displaced persons. Evidence-based, robust protection advocacy and response, notably monitoring of the fairness and effectiveness of the asylum processes, is a cornerstone of the UNHCR regional strategy, as is both individual and community-based delivery of protection services, including legal and psychosocial assistance. The Regional Representation also sees to it that efforts to protect and improve living conditions of asylum seekers, refugees and other displaced persons are effectively supported and based on standards and procedures harmonized throughout the region. In promoting local integration initiatives, the Regional Representation advocates for the mainstreaming of refugees, stateless persons and other displaced persons in national and local development programs and public services. In all the three countries in the South Caucasus, UNHCR advocates for the inclusion of refugees and other displaced persons in the programs aimed at nationalizing the SDGs, to ensure that 'no-one is being left behind' in the joint effort to achieve sustainable development, peace, security, respect of human rights and equal opportunities for all throughout the region. At a minimum, refugees and other displaced and stateless persons should be included under each of the relevant goals such as poverty reduction, access to food, health, education, energy, gender equality, and the establishment of peaceful and inclusive societies. Specific efforts may also be needed to ensure that populations of concern to UNHCR are included in the baseline statistics, UN advocacy documents, and programming tools intended to support national governments. As comprehensive strategic frameworks have been established for the region, in overall program matters, protection interventions and solutions approaches, but also in strategic communication and advocacy work, the various programs in the countries benefit from increased coherence and consistency, enhanced protection analysis, a sharper focus on solutions, and consistency of messaging throughout the region. As Regional Representative I am expected to provide support to Country Representatives in strengthening advocacy at senior government and NGO level, and address challenges which Country Representatives may face in operational management or use of human and financial resources. Regional structures have been established in a number of program areas, which provide for technical support and sharing of expertise and skills as well as regular exchange of information, analysis and good practices. In case of contingency

planning and emergency preparedness and response the Regional Representation provides expertise and resources as was demonstrated during the displacement resulting from the escalation of the Nagorno Karabakh conflict in April 2016. And finally, regional meetings and trainings, including those organized by the Quality Initiative (QIEE) for the wider region, bring staff and external actors (government, civil society) together representing countries which are in conflict with each other. They serve as a unique platform for creating mutual understanding and respect.

Since you have been travelling to Armenia recently, you have had opportunities to get acquainted with the Armenian culture, its values, local traditions, the history and the nature. Please tell us your impressions so far?

I have now been close to one and a half year in the region, and every day I enjoy being here. While the work is challenging and the solutions to the problems of displacement caused by conflict and disasters are nowhere around the corner, I do get my inspiration from my interaction with the people, including those we serve, and from learning about the history and culture of this region. My visits to Armenia have brought me into contact with wonderful people, who have invited me into their lives and homes, notably Mr. Yeganyan, the Head of the State Migration Service, who has taken me on unforgettable hiking trips including on Mount Aragats. I happened to be in Yerevan during the recent peaceful mass demonstrations and I was much impressed by the determination of the population to peacefully work for equal opportunities, for democracy and transparency, and for an inclusive society. I am also touched, every time I visit, by how the Armenian people cope with their traumatised past, and how they transform their loss and bereavement into humanitarian action for others, including Armenians who have now returned from Syria and Iraq where they were again the victims of war and persecution. The Armenian people show impressive resilience, rooted in a unique identity and rich and ancient culture. Christianity was established as a church in Armenia first, yet the country welcomes persons from all creeds. As a person with an academic background in comparative religion, the monasteries and other religious buildings in the country are a treasure to visit for me. Let me also express here the hope that ultimately we shall find a peaceful solution to the Nagorno Karabakh conflict and we shall witness at the appropriate time a resumption of good neighbourly relations with Azerbaijan and Turkey. For the immediate future, I am confident that the current transition period the country is experiencing will lead to an even stronger, united, resilient and prosperous country.

THREE PRIORITY PROBLEMS IN ARMENIA

New Accommodation Centre for Asylum Seekers in Armenia

The current Reception Centre for asylum seekers has been operating since 2003. The capacity of the accommodation centre is limited to 45 persons and the conflict in Syria showed that the capabilities of Accommodation Centre are far from satisfactory. Within the support of the project "Support to migration and border management" implemented by ICMPD and funded by the EU, the initiative of the new accommodation centre is ready. The accommodation centre will be designed for 120 asylum seekers and will be in line with international standards. For that purpose, the Government of the Republic of Armenia has allocated 2.5 hectares of area and plans to carry out the construction with the support of international organizations (the cost is approximately 1.5 million euro). More information is available [HERE](#).

Ensuring housing security of the most vulnerable refugee families forced to flee Azerbaijan from 1988-1992

Back in 2004 the RA Government approved a program on the issue of ensuring housing for refugee families forced to flee Azerbaijan from 1988-1992, which aimed at securing permanent housing of around 3264 refugee families residing in the dormitories. In the previous years it was possible to resolve the majority of their problems. Currently, 895 families, out of which 641 are in Yerevan and 254 are in the regions, continue to long for the day when they will be provided with certificates, which will enable them to buy apartments in the real estate markets. Those families have been living in the worst building conditions for nearly 30 years and in order to resolve the problem \$ 20 million is needed.

Integration of Syrian Refugees in Armenia

Due to the crisis in Syria, since 2013 Armenia has welcomed more than 22,000 Syrian refugees and Armenia is among the top three European countries by the indicator of 1,000 inhabitants. The absolute majority of refugees are ethnic Armenians and Armenia is making significant efforts with its international partners for integrating them into the Armenian society. On the one hand, this is in line with Armenia's policy that declared Armenia the homeland of all Diaspora Armenians and on the other hand it is economically justified. And finally, Syrians are renowned for their high entrepreneurial skills and many of them have created their own businesses in Armenia.

Upcoming Activities for Commemoration of the World Refugee Day in Armenia

- ◆ Dissemination of World Refugee Day press release and High Commissioner's message and video.
- ◆ Dissemination of **#WithRefugees** text message by telecom agencies on the campaign.
- ◆ TV/Radio/press media interviews.
- ◆ Production of a thematic banner (to hang on UN House façade) and poster.
- ◆ UNHCR - Armenian Caritas livelihood projects presentation and show.
- ◆ UNHCR-Armenia Caritas and Partners NGOs - open-air craft-sale by Persons of Concern.
- ◆ World Refugee Day events with the participation of for asylum-seekers and refugees.
- ◆ **#WithRefugees** excursion for PoC residents of Charentsavan/Hrazdan and Darbnik.
- ◆ Lecture and awareness-raising sessions for student universities, volunteers and local/refugee youth.
- ◆ Open-air concert with the participation of displaced Syrian and local artists, and refugees.
- ◆ Development of two small video materials featuring displaced youth and women entrepreneurs.
- ◆ Other events.



The Migration Newsletter has been produced by the Migration Service of the Republic of Armenia.

PETITION TO STAND WITH REFUGEES

Now more than ever, we need to stand **#WithRefugees**
Join the 1,903,012 who have pledged their support!

Each day war forces thousands of families to flee their homes. People like you, people like me. To escape the violence, they leave everything behind – everything except their hopes and dreams for a safer future.

UNHCR, the UN Refugee Agency believes all refugees deserve to live in safety.

Add your name to the #WithRefugees petition to send a clear message to decision makers that they must act with solidarity and shared responsibility.

The petition asks decision makers to:

- ◆ *Ensure every refugee child gets an education.*
- ◆ *Ensure every refugee family has somewhere safe to live.*
- ◆ *Ensure every refugee can work or learn new skills to support their families.*

We stand together #WithRefugees. Please stand with us.

Join our <http://www.unhcr.org/refugeeday/petition/> campaign. Sign the petition today **Sign #WithRefugees petition**

The campaign continues until a Global Compact for Refugees is adopted in 2018.

What is the Global Compact for Refugees?

In 2018 world leaders will come to the UN to agree on a more just way of managing the global refugee crisis. This agreement, called The Global Compact for Refugees is all about sharing responsibility; where all parts of society stand together **#WithRefugees** and do their fair share instead of leaving individual states to bear the burden of mass forced displacement.

We're very much interested in hearing your suggestions and comments on the newsletter. Please send your feedback on

migrationservice.sms@mta.gov.am

