

Western Europe:

Cradle of Modern Asylum Systems



UNHCR

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
Haut Commissariat des Nations Unies pour les réfugiés

UNHCR Regional Representation
for Western Europe
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The Western Europe Region of UNHCR covers Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands directly and oversees activities in Austria, France, Germany, Ireland, Liechtenstein, Monaco, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. The Regional Representation for Western Europe was created in 2009 and is based in Brussels.

Six decades of asylum experience

In Europe, UNHCR has three other regional offices in charge of Northern, Central and Southern Europe.

Western Europe, together with Scandinavia, is the cradle of modern asylum systems, the region that has the longest-standing experience with asylum-seekers and refugees. With some of the most developed asylum systems, European countries are setting standards of worldwide relevance.

Here, structures to legally protect and assist refugees were put in place six decades ago, drawing on previous cultural and political traditions of granting safe havens to the persecuted. In Western European countries, UNHCR opened its first branch offices immediately after its establishment in 1951.

Over the past six decades, hundreds of thousands of refugees from all continents have found a new home in Western Europe.



Western European countries do not limit their support to refugees to their own territory – quite the contrary. They are important donors and partners, helping UNHCR to carry out its operations all over the world.

Number of asylum-seekers in Europe much lower than in the 90s

In 2009, Western Europe received 160,300 asylum applications, which constitute 65% of all asylum applications (246,200) lodged in all EU Member States.

Aside from fluctuations and peaks in some countries, there has been a considerable overall decline in asylum applications in Europe during the past decade. In 1999, 15 EU Member States registered 388,000 asylum applications, compared to 246,000 in the 27 Member States in 2009.

Protection status for 1 in 3 applicants

Nevertheless, in some countries, notably in Belgium and France, the number of applications has been rising again since 2008.

The chances of asylum-seekers receiving international protection in Western Europe vary from country to country, but on average one out of three asylum applications are successful at first instance. In 2009, approximately 54,400 people were granted some form of protection (refugee status, subsidiary protection or humanitarian status).

Contrary to a widespread myth, only a relatively small portion of the global refugee population of 15.5 million is trying to come to Europe every year. Statistics show that 83% of the refugees stay in their region of origin, in most cases just fleeing to neighbouring countries. Developing countries host 8 out of 10 refugees. South Africa alone registered 222,000 asylum-seekers in 2009, which roughly equals the number of asylum-seekers in the EU 27.

Who are the asylum-seekers coming to Western Europe?

Asylum-seekers in Europe come from a large number of crisis regions and unstable countries. Afghans and Iraqis can be found throughout the region. Other larger groups of asylum-seekers are present in some of the countries. They are from countries such as Somalia, Serbia (mostly ethnic minorities originating from Kosovo), the Russian Federation, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, Iran and DR Congo.

Notwithstanding national differences, a few common trends have emerged in Western Europe over the past few years. A significant development is the increase in the number of unaccompanied or separated children escaping from war, extreme poverty and other threatening situations. In 2009, over 8,000 minors, sometimes as young as 10 and 11 years of age, came to the Western Europe Region. The vast majority are boys, originating mostly from Afghanistan, Somalia and Iraq. Many apply for asylum, while others do not.

A characteristic of refugee populations in Western Europe is the relatively low proportion of women. On average, one-third of asylum-seekers are female, e.g.,

France (38.1%) and the United Kingdom (37.3%). Switzerland (25.9%) and Liechtenstein (13.6%) receive the lowest number of applicants of this category.



In 2009 over 8,000 minors were seeking refuge alone in Western Europe. Photo: UNHCR

Over 4,000 refugees resettled to Western Europe in 2009

UNHCR is in constant search of resettlement places for refugees who cannot stay in their current country of refuge for security or other reasons. In Western Europe, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, and the UK have regular resettlement programs. Other countries such as Belgium, Germany and Switzerland accept resettled refugees on an ad hoc basis.

In addition, following a November 2008 call from the EU Council of Ministers to resettle 10,000 Iraqi refugees, Belgium, France, Germany and Luxembourg were among countries making special efforts to receive Iraqi refugees.

In 2009, a total of 4,245 refugees of many different nationalities were resettled in the Western Europe Region.



Resettled refugees getting used to European weather. Photo: UNHCR

US\$ 280 million in private and government donations in 2009

UNHCR is financed almost entirely by voluntary contributions. Through the European Commission, UNHCR's second largest donor, Western European countries contribute a considerable amount of money indirectly.

In addition, eight out of the eleven Western European countries rank among the top 25 donors of the UN Refugee Agency: Netherlands 5th, Germany 7th, United Kingdom 10th, Switzerland 15th, Belgium 16th, France 17th, Ireland 20th and Luxembourg 25th. In 2009, Western European government contributions (excluding the European Commission) totalled US\$ 275.6 million.

Western European donors rank high

Private donations to UNHCR from the Western European Region amounted to US\$ 4.3 million in 2009.

UNHCR strives to preserve protection space

Western European asylum systems are generally solid, but there are also areas for improvement as well as negative developments, which have been nurtured and aggravated by rising anti-immigration and xenophobic sentiments in parts of the Western European population.

With national budgets under pressure due to the economic recession, reduced funding could have an impact on the living conditions of asylum-seekers, the work of asylum authorities, integration programs and possibilities for family reunification.

Another cause for concern is a tendency to introduce more restrictive asylum policies, including measures to deter people from entering or staying.

Tightening asylum policies

Although there are significant differences between countries, UNHCR is concerned by some practices that are becoming more widespread

in Western Europe:

- Non-admission to the asylum procedure paired with increased and systematic use of accelerated procedures;
- Transfers of asylum-seekers to Greece under the Dublin II Regulation, even though UNHCR has repeatedly advised against this practice as Greece currently does not yet have the capacity to deal with asylum-seekers in conformity with international and EU standards;
- Shortage or denial of proper accommodation for new arrivals;
- Increased use of detention, sometimes including families with children;
- Forced returns to countries such as Iraq and Somalia or parts thereof, contrary to UNHCR eligibility guidelines.

UNHCR continuously encourages governments to fully preserve the protection space traditionally granted to asylum-seekers and refugees in Western Europe. At the same time, UNHCR agrees with the need to combat people-smuggling networks to counter abuse and to uphold the integrity of asylum systems.

Moving Towards a Common European Asylum System

All EU Member States in the region participate in the Common European Asylum System and have adapted their national legislation to EU laws, such as the Qualification Directive, the Reception Conditions Directive, the Asylum Procedures Directive and the Dublin II Regulation.

People fleeing from persecution or armed conflict, whether from Iraq, Afghanistan, African countries or elsewhere, often have very different chances of being recognized as refugees, depending on the country handling their asylum request.

As a recent UNHCR study has shown, there are still considerable discrepancies in the application of the Asylum Procedures Directive among countries in Europe. Material assistance to asylum-seekers and refugees also varies greatly.

UNHCR is therefore advocating with governments in bilateral contacts and at the EU level for the equal treatment of asylum-seekers and persons with protection status across Europe.