

2014 Annual Reception Conditions Monitoring Report

Photos:

Dimitrina Popova

Lora Peeva

Maya Maslinkova

Jacob Zocherman

Temenuga Simeonova

Ivanka Puleva

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List of abbreviations

SAR – State Agency for Refugees

UNHCR – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

BRC – Bulgarian Red Cross

RMS – Refugee Migrant Service

BHC – Bulgarian Helsinki Committee

RRC – Registration and Reception Center

SCTAF – Special Center for the Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners

AC – Accommodation center

TC – Transit Center

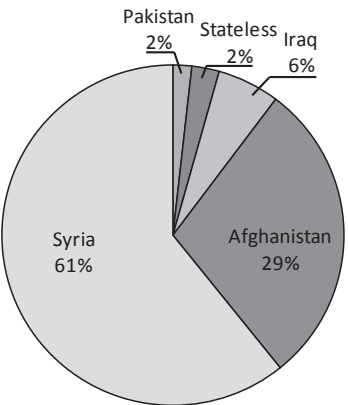
EASO – European Asylum Support Office

1. Overview

The deteriorating humanitarian crisis in Syria, combined with the increasingly unstable situation in Afghanistan and Iraq, has led to a substantial growth in the number of asylum-seekers in Bulgaria. In 2013 the number of people who have sought asylum in the country rose drastically to 7144 (a five-fold increase compared to 2012 when only 1387 applications were filed). The asylum seekers were (and still are) predominantly Syrians or Stateless from Syria – with more than 25% being minors. In 2013, the State Agency for Refugees (SAR) granted a total of 2462 refugee or humanitarian status compared to only 177 positive status decisions in 2012.

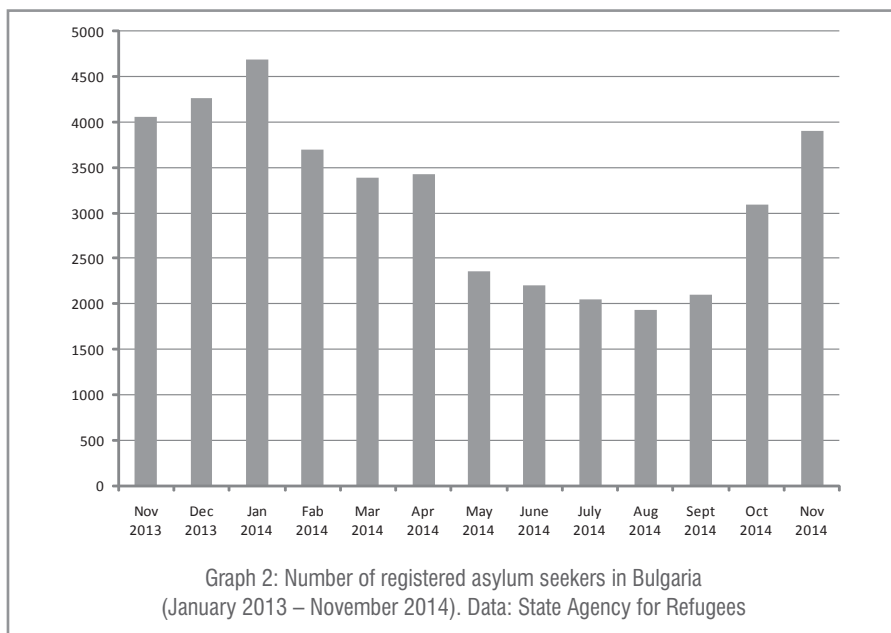
The critically rising influx of asylum seekers started in September 2013 with about 200 asylum seekers entering the country per day. The unprecedented situation led to the emergency opening of four new state reception facilities (2 in Sofia, 1 in Harmanli and 1 in Kovachevtzi). The previously functioning registration and reception centers (RRCs) in Sofia (Ovcha kupel), Pastrogor (Haskovo region) and Banya, (Sliven region) were expanded.

The increasing numbers of unaccompanied minors (UAMs) – 462 by the end of September 2014 as compared to 183 in 2013 – posed a significant challenge for state authorities, as well as for aid organizations assisting asylum seekers and beneficiaries of international protection. Most asylum-seekers in Bulgaria come from Syria, but a significant increase of people coming from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, as well as from African countries like Ghana, Cot d 'Ivore, Mali, Algeria, and Morocco was noticed. The diversity of asylum seeking communities created difficulties in information dissemination, legal interpretation and day-to-day communication with persons in the RRCs.



Graph 1: Top 5 countries of origin (January-December 2014).
Data: State Agency for Refugees

The report looks into reception conditions in all SAR centers and the facilities of the Directorate of Migration in Elhovo and Lyubimets. It aspires to follow developments and remaining challenges in each center and provide recommendations for institutions and practitioners in the field. All statistical data is gathered from institutions operating in the centers and from monitoring reports compiled by staff members of Bulgarian Red Cross – Refugee Migrant Service (BRC-RMS).



The graph illustrates two clear peaks in asylum claims – one at the end of 2013 and one at the end of the current year which is still developing. Limited access to seasonal work and inadequate reception condition in Turkey put additional pressure on refugee communities to seek entry to EU countries, including Bulgaria.

2. Legal framework

Bulgaria is a signatory to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. According to its provisions, refugees deserve, as a minimum, the same standards of treatment enjoyed by other foreign nationals in a given country and, in many cases, the same treatment as nationals. As a member of the European Union, Bulgaria is simultaneously under obligation to comply with EU-wide legislation in the sphere of asylum protection. The guiding legal instrument when it comes to living conditions is Council Directive 2003/9/EC also known as the Reception Conditions Directive. The document sets minimum standards for the reception of asylum seekers on the territory of a member state and aims to ensure that the applicants have a dignified standard

of living and that comparable living conditions are afforded to them. The Directive will apply to all nationals of third countries as well as to stateless persons who have requested asylum at the border or on the territory of a Member State, as well as accompanying family members. The most important provisions stipulate that applicants must be provided with:

- Information of their rights and the benefits they may claim, as well as the obligations they have to comply with;
- A document certifying their status as applicants for asylum and allows applicants' freedom of movement within the member state's territory;
- Certain material reception conditions, in particular accommodation, food and clothing, in kind or in the form of a financial allowance;
- Family unity;
- Medical and psychological care;
- Access to the education system for minor children and language courses to enable them to attend ordinary school.

The European Union has worked toward harmonization of asylum protection and reception conditions since 1999 but despite the wide array of directives and regulations, considerable differences remain among member states and their capacity to take on large numbers of asylum seekers.

When it comes to reception conditions in Bulgaria, similar rights are guaranteed by the Law on Asylum and Refugees from 2002 (Article 29-1, amended in 2007) – during the asylum procedure the foreigner has the right to:

- Remain on the territory of Republic of Bulgaria;
- Accommodation and food;
- Social support, according to and of the amount appropriated to Bulgarian citizens;
- Health insurance, affordable medical care and access to medical services free of charge to the same level as Bulgarian citizens;
- Psychological support;
- Be issued a registration card;
- Translation and interpretation.

Additionally, the article continues to grant access to all asylum seekers to a transit, registration, reception or another center of the State Agency for Refugees after a thorough screening of their medical, family and financial status (Article 29-4). The Law provides for special consideration for vulnerable groups in Article 30 – namely children and minors, pregnant women, the elderly, single parents accompanied by their children and minors, persons with disabilities and those victims of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV).

The main responsibility falls with the State Agency for Refugees but there are many other state institutions and non-governmental organizations actively working in the centers to ensure

adequate reception conditions and support to persons accommodated there. During 2014, a variety of projects and activities were implemented by international and national organizations as well as by volunteers

3. Reception conditions in SAR centers

3.1. Registration of asylum applications

By Bulgarian laws, foreigners apprehended by Border or Immigration Police at border check points are detained for 24 hours. Once detained persons decide to apply for asylum they are transferred to the Elhovo Triage Centre within 24 hours where they spend between three and five days before being transferred to a SAR reception facility. Irregular immigrants, on the other hand, are sent to the Special Centers for Temporary Accommodation of Foreigners (SCTAFs) in Bustmansi and Lyubimets managed by the Directorate of Migration. If they apply for asylum while in detention, they are transferred to a SAR facility where they are registered.

In all detention centers detainees receive food regularly, have access to medical care when needed, and to basic recreational activities which includes television, books and outdoor areas. UNHCR, through its legal partner Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC), provides regular legal counselling to asylum-seekers in detention with the service of interpreters. Social counselling and monitoring including referral to BHC is also provided on a weekly basis by another implementing partner, Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC).

In order to meet the rising number of asylum claims, SAR has hired 160 additional staff in the first months of 2014, mainly registration officers and interviewers. The vast majority of newly recruited staff received training and support on the management of reception centers, including on prevention and response to Gender Based Violence (GBV) and the identification of persons with specific needs by UNHCR, and on the Asylum Procedure Determination and registration by the European Asylum Sup-

Triage Center Elhovo

The average period of accommodation in the facility – from arrival to transfer to one of the SAR reception facilities, is approximately 4-5 days. Priority is given to families (especially with children), minors and other vulnerable persons like pregnant women and the elderly. Initial screening interviews are conducted by the Directorate of Migration (DoM) interviewers supported by FRONTEX or the translators of the SAR registration team present in the facility. In line with internal regulations, all foreigners are allowed to spend 2 hours in the morning and 2 in the afternoon outside in the yard. Living conditions in the facility are acceptable and residents are regularly supplied with hygienic products and have access to medical assistance.

port Office (EASO). UNHCR has provided technical equipment and training to improve the data collection process regarding asylum seekers, including disaggregated data reflecting age and gender. UNHCR and European Asylum Support Office (EASO) continue to work with the Bulgarian State Agency for Refugees (SAR) in order to enhance the capacity of staff with regard to collecting, analyzing and reporting statistical data in line with Regulation 862/2007 on migration and international protection statistics.

Bulgarian Helsinki Committee (BHC)

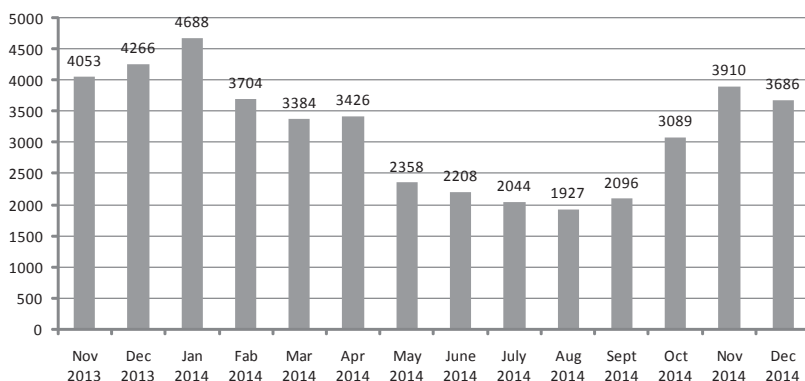
BHC is a long-standing UNHCR's implementing partner and provides professional legal aid to all asylum seekers in Bulgaria free of charge – from the moment they are intercepted at borders until they receive their status decisions. In 2014 trained profilers and lawyers were present in all SAR Centers and in the facilities of Directorate of Migration. They provide individual consultations, information on rights and duties and monitor the whole RSD procedure. Under the BHC's Refugees' and Migrants' Legal Protection Program, asylum seekers have their rights safeguarded and receive access to legal assistance which is otherwise inaccessible, including access and representation in front of Bulgarian national courts.

SAR managed to clear the backlog of asylum claims piled up at the end of 2013 but the greater number of people arriving in the centers towards the end of 2014 led to slower Registration and Status Determination procedure due in part to the scarcity of available interpreters and a larger number of registrations.

3.2. Accommodation

At the end of 2012, the reception capacity of SAR centers is merely 782. The Agency managed to identify new facilities to be adapted for the needs of asylum seekers and to expand the capacity to 4060 places. At the end of 2013 and beginning of 2014 four new RRCs opened doors for asylum seekers– AC Vrazhdebna (420 spaces), AC Voenna Rampa (700 spaces), RRC Harmanli (1450 spaces) and AC Kovacevci (350 spaces). Those are further renovated and expanded by the end of 2014 to allow SAR to reach reception capacity of 6000.

Conditions observed in the centers have improved significantly in comparison with the situation observed in December 2013, particularly in the facility of Harmanli where all persons previously accommodated in tents have been moved to the newly renovated buildings. In all seven centers there was no notable overcrowding as was the case at the end of 2013. Asylum seekers are accommodated according to gender and family status and family unity is maintained.



Graph 3: Number of persons accommodated in SAR centers (November 2013-December 2014). Data: State Agency for Refugees

Refurbishment of SAR centers

At the end of 2013 SAR renovated 3 old military buildings in the accommodation center in Harmanli and moved all asylum seekers from tents into the newly renovated rooms. In April 2014 the renovation of the four-story school building in Voenna Rampa which allowed for asylum seekers to be moved from the gym into family rooms with new walls, floors, windows and beds. Major construction work was carried out in Vrazhdebna including new washing and shower facilities. The rest of the SAR facilities had only minor renovation since they were judged to be up to acceptable living standards.

BRC Youth (funded by the Dutch Red Cross and the Dutch Government) implemented a variety of measures to improve sanitation conditions in the centers. Under this project, BRC Youth renovated rooms and installed laundry facilities in Vrazh-



BRC staff and volunteers distribute humanitarian aid in Vrazhdebna. (Photo: BRC)

debna, Voenna Rampa and Harmanli. The rooms are equipped with domestic and professional washing machines, dryers, ironing machines, washing detergent and soap. Additionally, BRC Youth funded the cleaning of chemical toilets used during the renovation work in the living quarters, regular hygiene promotion meetings with community leaders, distribution of materials (e.g. brooms, buckets, disinfectant) for private rooms and common areas.



Distribution of humanitarian aid in Kovancevci
(Photo: BRC)

BRC-RMS conducted regular distribution of humanitarian aid throughout the year (food and hygienic packages, medicines, school materials, clothes and shoes, baby milk, diapers, disinfectants, linens and beds) under projects funded by UNHCR, Swiss Red Cross, Republic of Slovakia, and the US State Department

Bulgarian Red Cross – Refugee Migrant Service (BRC-RMS)

In 2014 BRC-RMS implemented a UNHCR-funded project to improve reception conditions in all 7 SAR centers, provide social services and facilitate social inclusion, initial adaptation and integration of asylum seekers and refugees. BRC-RMS placed 7 full-time social workers in the centers to assist residents with information on their rights and duties, help with interpretation and access to basic services like medical care. Throughout 2014, 9250 persons were individually supported by the present social workers on the ground.

Number of persons accommodated in SAR centers		RRC Banya	TC Pastrogor	RRC Sofia	Vrazhdebna	Voenna Rampa	Harmanli	Kovacevci	Total
Capacity		150	300	860	300	700	3340	350	6000
Persons accommodated	Total	58	247	649	302	582	2030	0	3868
	% filled	39%	82%	75%	101%	83%	61%	0%	65%
	Syrian citizens	7	139	308	6	545	1680	0	2685

Number of persons accommodated in SAR centers as of 1 December 2014 – by centers.
Data: Ministry of Foreign Affairs

According to national legislation, all asylum-seekers are expected to leave the reception centers within 14 days of receiving a final decision on their claim. However, in practice SAR has tolerated many refugees and holders of subsidiary protection staying in reception centers mainly because they lack the resources to rent adequate housing in the absence of social assistance and integration programs in place, and considering the winter weather period. Status holders were allowed to stay up to six months after receiving a positive decision but there are statements by SAR officials claiming that is only the case where there are spaces available in the centers. If the reception capacity of SAR is overwhelmed in the coming months, status holders will be asked to leave and provide for themselves. In December 2014 SAR centers are filled up to 65% with 2132 spaces available for newly arriving asylum seekers.

At the same time the detention facilities of the Directorate of Migration are increasingly overstretched – with the SCTAFs in Busmantsi and Ljubimets and the Triage Center in Elhovo operating at above 25% of their total capacity. There are intensified police raids conducted by the territorial structures of Directorate of Migration which result in the increased number of irregular migrants being detained, including those who have managed to arrive to Sofia without being

previously detected. Out of the 1171 persons detained in the three facilities of the Directorate of Migration, 40% are Afghans.

Mid-year SAR took a strategic decision to direct persons from different nationalities towards certain centers. The measure was taken to alleviate pressure on SAR to provide translation and interpretation in the different many languages spoken by asylum seekers. In October 2014, the center in Kovacevci was closed due to its financial inefficiency and the extended capacity of other facilities and all residents were transferred to the centers in Sofia. In the process AC Harmanli remained mostly occupied by persons of Syrian origin, Vrazhdebna became a center where predominantly Afghan persons will be accommodated, and TC Pastrogor was scheduled to receive persons arriving from African countries. In October 2014, the center in Kovacevci was closed and all residents transferred to the centers in Sofia. This practice had limited success in facilitating communication and was met with disapproval by NGOs working in the sector, especially in the case of RRC Banya which was selected to receive Unaccompanied Minors (UAMs).

Unaccompanied Minors (UAMs)

RRC Banya is situated in a secluded and isolated area in Nova Zagora region with a capacity of up to 66 persons. Throughout the second part of 2014, it became the primary point of accommodating UAMs. Its location, lack of social activities and difficulties in communication with the administration are considered among the main reasons for most of the accommodated minors to leave the center unauthorized. BRC-RMS staff (Sliven branch) visits the center regularly and supports UAMs through direct distribution of hygienic kits, clothes and shoes, baby milk and diapers. BRC social worker has established a positive relation with residents and provides them with information, social counseling, and access to medical and dental services.

3.3. Food

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees provided food to residents in Harmanli in December 2013 and to RCs Harmanli, Kovacevci, Voenna Rampa and Vrazhdebna in January 2014. UNHCR has been actively partnering with SAR since the beginning of the influx – the Representation in Sofia declared an Emergency Phase 1 at the end of 2013 and worked both through direct implementation of activities and implementing partners' projects. UNHCR funded the construction of three commercial kitchens for the needs of asylum seekers accommodated in Harmanli, Voenna Rampa and Vrazhdebna. During 2014 food was cooked in old military kitchens or other premises and transported to reception centers which posed logistical and financial burden on SAR. In February 2014 this service was taken over by military kitchens and later on by SAR in April 2014. Since October 2014 food in Harmanli, Voenna Rampa and Vrazhdebna is cooked and served in modern premises with cooking and dining facilities. Since SAR

took over the provision of food, products are purchased by them but also through donations by Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC)

Residents receive two hot meals a day which are prepared with the support of persons from the community in order to meet the taste requirements of the Muslim population. Some asylum seekers complain that the food is suitable for the taste of the Arab population but not for theirs (e.g. persons from Africa). In the course of the year most residents found the food to be of good quality and sufficient quantity but occasionally protests and complaints were staged, especially where quantity is concerned. According to SAR the food served meets international standards of daily calorie intake.

3.4. Medical Care

Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) or Doctors without Borders worked actively in Bulgaria from November 2013 until May 2014 to provide medical and psychological assistance to asylum seekers in centers in Sofia and Harmanli. Additionally it distributed essential aid and made improvements to buildings and hygiene facilities in the three reception centers (Harmanli, Voenna Rampa and Vrazhdebna). MSF teams conducted 7700 medical consultations and provided mental support to vulnerable groups.



Distribution of humanitarian aid in Kovacevci
(Photo: BRC)

After the end of their mission in Bulgaria, there was a serious gap in the provision of medical aid in SAR centers. Even though most centers had a regular presence of a doctor, paramedic or nurse to perform medical checks and refer patients to specialist, administrative and logistical reasons prevented many of them from receiving adequate health care.

All residents must be registered with a General Practitioner (GP) in order to be referred for spe-

cialized treatment which still remains a challenge in Harmanli. In August, SAR managed to hire a part-time pediatrician for the center. SAR has entered multiple negotiations with the National Health Fund but there were no GP identified who were willing to take on a large number of asylum seekers. Many of the local doctors are taken aback by the fact that the patients are foreigners, speaking a different language which makes communication and diagnosis difficult. During the RSD procedure, all registered asylum seekers have their health insurance paid by SAR. Once

BRC Health Activities

BRC-RMS has provided financial assistance to asylum seekers in all SAR centers to purchase prescribed medicines and pay for medical checks and visits to specialists where the applicant had no sufficient financial means. 400 persons were assisted in Harmanli, Pastrogor and Banya and 210 in Sofia with the financial support of UNHCR and Swiss Red Cross. Additionally, BRC funded the supply of medical cabinets in Harmanli and Pastrogor.

issued with a decision on their status, their health rights are interrupted which leaves people vulnerable and discouraged to seek medical help.

During the last 12 months there have been a small number of health concerns in different SAR centers which were mainly due to overcrowding and poor hygienic conditions. In June 300 persons in the accommodation center in the village of

Kovacevci were put under quarantine after 7 cases of measles. In the accommodation center Voenna Rampa there were 2 cases of Hepatitis A identified in March. Hepatitis shots were given 25 children residing in the center by a mobile team of the Regional Health Inspection/RZI-HEI/.

3.5. Psycho-social support (PSS)

Psycho-social provision is one of the basic needs of persons running from violence which is often overlooked, especially in setting where meeting the more urgent needs of shelter and food become a priority. However, a number of NGOs stepped in to fill gaps in the provision of such support. BRC (funded by UNHCR) organized mobile PSS teams consisting of a team leader, psychologist and interpreter (Farsi and Arabic). The two teams (one for Sofia region and one for South Bulgaria) visited the all centers weekly, holding individual and group psychological sessions with persons with traumatic experiences, victims of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV) and other persons in need of support. In 2014



Playtime for children in AC Voenna Rampa – 10 January 2014
(Source: BRC Youth)

PSS teams reported the provision of individual support to a total of 1388 individuals in Sofia (856) and Haskovo (532) regions.

BRC Youth conducted regular visits to the centers in Sofia to provide PSS activities to children under a Dutch Red Cross funded project. Thirty volunteers were trained to form 2 teams per center, with one team leader in each. The activities were organized by age group (0 – 18 years old) and adapted according to the context; they included sports, drawing, songs, games, Bulgarian language classes and regular communication with parents.

Professional psychiatrists and psychologists from Foundation Center Nadya (a Bulgarian NGO) made bi-weekly visits to the Pastrogor, Banya and Kovacevci and conducted individual and group therapeutic sessions with asylum seekers. The project is funded by UNHCR and aims at providing the most vulnerable persons with quality support to cope with traumatic experiences as a result of witnessing or living through violence.

3.6. Social activities

In the beginning of the year, due to the rapid rise in asylum seekers, efforts by the state and non-governmental actors were focused on providing basic services and adequate living conditions. Once the crisis was under control, the need for extra services became evident. Recreational activities for children and adults were organized under different projects and with the support of volunteers. UNHCR erected three temporary structures (tents) in Harmanli, Vrazhdebna and Voenna Rampa to provide space where adults and children can gather and engage in social activities. Once reception capacity was increased, recreational rooms were allocated in each center for the use of the community. BRC-RMS equipped the spaces with furniture, games and toys, drawing materials, books and puzzles. Under the supervision of SAR and BRC social workers, volunteers from Cooperation for Voluntary Service (CVS Bulgaria) organized a variety of recreational and educational activities for children. BRC Haskovo also ran a small volunteer social project funded by Foundation Velux to aid the integration of 50 children in AC Harmanli through interactive Bulgarian language classes.



Volunteers from BRC and CVS Bulgaria celebrate New Year with refugee children.
(Photo: BRC)

For two weeks in June 2014, all SAR centers were visited by the French NGO „Clowns and Magicians without Borders“. The organization's performances promote understanding and reach out to children in refugee camps through laughter.



Refugee children in Vrazhdebna greet visitors for March 3, Bulgarian national holiday

UNHCR initiated the so-called „tea sessions“ in Harmanli which aimed to provide safe and comfortable space for women to communicate, interact and discuss various topics with a therapist. Additionally, part of the sessions provided participants with skills in arts and crafts like jewelry-making, knitting, decoupage, and candle-making. The initiative was replicated since September in Voenna Rampa, Vrazhdebna and Pastrogor with material support provided by BRC and sessions conducted by CVS Bulgaria and CARITAS volunteers. For adults, the arts and crafts workshops also provided an opportunity to learn new skills, to socialize and to market their products and generate additional income. CVS Bulgaria, CARITAS and BRC organized two Christmas markets in December to promote refugee communities' cuisine and hand-made creations.

In 2014 BRC organized a number of special events to celebrate 1 March (Martenitsa Day), 21 March (Persian New Year), 1 June, 20 June (World Refugee Day) and New Year with traditional meals, songs and dances and presents and sweets for the children. World Refugee Day was



BRC promotes refugee arts and crafts at a Christmas market at BRC HQ

celebrated very modestly and in silence due to the devastating floods in Bulgaria in June. BRC and SAR organized the transportation and accommodation in Varna of 16 refugees from the center in Harmanli who volunteered to help clear debris. Around 70 persons volunteered but only those already holding a status are allowed to work, according to regulations.



Refugees from Harmanli help the affected population in Varna (Photo: BRC)

3.7. Education

CARITAS Sofia (funded by UNHCR) organized Bulgarian language classes for adults and children in six SAR centers. Initially, one educational room in each center was equipped with white boards, desks and chairs and classes were held from March until December 2014. Classes were well-attended in the beginning with more than 100 persons enrolled in the larger facilities like Harmanli and Voenna Rampa. However, due to the constant leaving of residents and new arrivals daily, many students could not finish the two-month-long course. Teachers with



Children from Harmanli and Pastrogor visit the ancient village of Mezek – 17 October 2014.
(Photo: BRC)



Refugee children in Voenna Rampa tell BRC friends „I love you“ in Arabic.
(Photo: BRC)

experience in teaching Bulgarian as a foreign language prepared children for enrolling in public schools and organized various educational activities like conversational trips to museums and excursions. With support from BRC social workers, a group of children from Harmanli and Pastrogor visited the village of Mezek, children from centers in Sofia visited Belchin Banya and Koprivshtica.

In RRC Sofia SAR funded Bulgarian language classes as well as courses for acquiring professional skills in hair-styling, cosmetics and tailoring.

Outstanding issues and recommendations

- There is need for further improvement of reception conditions in order to reach international standards – insufficient number and condition of sanitation facilities are among the main complaints of residents in all SAR centers.
- SAR should look into increasing its reception capacity in view of the growing number of asylum seekers entering Bulgaria in the last months of 2014.
- Access to specialized medical help is still problematic, especially in Harmanli where local GPs refuse to enlist patients from the refugee community.
- The frequent turnover of residents in SAR centers disrupts the sustainability of services especially in terms of Bulgarian language class attendance and school enrollment of children.
- Status holders residing in SAR centers are at risk of becoming homeless – vulnerable individuals should be provided with sustainable options to leave the centers and receive continuous

4. Conclusion

In 2014 state institutions and NGOs faced unprecedented pressure to perform under difficult conditions and provide for a rising number of asylum seekers and refugees arriving daily on the territory of Bulgaria. BRC has played a crucial role for the improvement of reception conditions in SAR centers and have trained staff in Sofia and in the regional branches to work professionally with beneficiaries of international protection. Efficient coordination, information sharing and cooperation were difficult but provided a learning experience for all actors involved. The integration of a large number of persons who received humanitarian and refugee status remains challenging and additional efforts are needed to ensure that an adequate National Strategy for Integration is adopted and financed. In the centers, SAR has planned additional renovation work and improvements while NGOs will continue to provide services in 2015. In December 2014 SAR has requested over 26 Million Leva for 2015 to be able to operate but was only allocated 6.6 Million Leva from the State Budget.