



United States Mission to the OSCE

Session 6: Humanitarian Issues

Refugees and displaced persons

Treatment of citizens of other participating States

Human rights education

As prepared for delivery by Ambassador Cynthia Efirid
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Within the boundaries of the OSCE region, the situation of vulnerable refugees and displaced persons has been particularly exacerbated by instability in conflict regions and the global economic downturn. The United States delegation would like to draw attention to several specific concerns.

We remain concerned by the plight of hundreds of thousands of displaced persons and refugees from Georgia, forced from their homes by conflicts in 2008 and the early 1990s. The United States supported the resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly on September 7, 2010, reiterating the right of return of all displaced persons and refugees in Georgia, including Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Arrangements must be made for their safe and dignified voluntary return or local integration as soon as possible. In this regard, we continue to urge constructive approaches to making progress on related discussions in Geneva.

The plight of refugees and displaced persons in the Balkans also remains a concern. Officially, almost 300,000 are in Serbia, many of them from Kosovo but others from Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, more than 100,000 persons are registered as internally displaced. Finding permanent solutions requires, first and foremost, addressing the pervasive hostility to returnees. Threats, harassment and even attacks on returnees and potential returnees must be stopped. Local authorities have a responsibility to take action to counter anti-return sentiments.

Host countries offering permanent residency and naturalization commit themselves to integrate refugees and displaced persons, including Roma and others who are not part of the country's ethnic majority. The countries that emerged from the former Yugoslavia must continue and intensify their cooperation on these matters. Meanwhile, there are recent reports of the increased return of displaced Roma to Kosovo from Germany and other European countries outside the region without sufficient prior attention to ensuring that the conditions exist for their safety and sustainability upon return. On September 22, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe Migration Committee called on European governments to suspend such returns to Kosovo "until they can be shown to be safe and sustainable." The Government of Kosovo has pledged to accept and work to integrate Roma returnees, but it is equally incumbent on the sending countries to assist and work with Kosovo authorities to ease the transition.

The requirements of the Dublin II Convention place a disproportionate asylum burden on border countries such as Cyprus, Greece, Italy, Malta, Spain, and France. This continuing challenge must be addressed better. The failure of some OSCE countries to distinguish asylum seekers from other migrants is a major obstacle to those seeking protection. We support UNHCR's continued work to address these issues in the region, welcome the development of a European common policy, as well as the creation of the European Asylum Support Office to assist in the harmonization of best practices throughout the European Union. We look for much needed legislative reform efforts in Greece. We urge the Government of Turkey to continue its review of the existing geographic limitation on its accession to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and increase its humanitarian assistance programs to improve quality of life for refugees while they are temporarily in Turkey.

We are concerned when government officials in some OSCE countries express anti-immigrant sentiment thus contributing to a climate of xenophobia. In its most extreme form, this can lead to bias-motivated violence against refugees, asylum seekers, and others. Neither the expulsions of Romani people, nor the imprisonment of migrants without due process, will resolve problems. Government officials and civic leaders must respond with coordinated efforts to reduce community tensions around immigration issues. The use of OSCE human rights educational materials and the training of civil society members to correctly identify, monitor, and report hate crimes and other acts of discrimination can also greatly assist in these efforts.

On the important issue of human rights awareness, it is critical that we, as participating States, share our successful initiatives. While the United States is a federal system, and as such, has no national education curricula, we do support the work of non-governmental organizations and of our individual states to promote respect for human rights in schools throughout our country. We can learn from each other and from OSCE leadership on accurate monitoring, preventing the duplication of existing programs, and providing assistance to others interested in existing models that address common problems. We encourage all OSCE participating States to join us in commending both OSCE and ODIHR for their critical work in spearheading efforts to promote human rights education across the region.

Thank you.