



Presidential Conference

20 June 2013

Your Excellency Mrs. Vice-President, Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honor for me to be able to open this Conference on the “National System for the Protection of Foreigners in the Republic of Bulgaria” organized under the patronage of the Presidency of the Republic as the Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

I wish to thank you, Mrs. Vice-President, for choosing the 20th of June for this very timely conference. For today is World Refugee Day, a day when we take 1 moment to commemorate the bravery and struggle of over 45 million fathers, mothers, sons and daughters – individually or in families – who have been forcibly displaced because of fierce armed conflicts and persecution.

It is 21 years ago that Bulgaria became a party to the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. And actually, in July this year, UNHCR will have been present in Bulgaria for 20 years. It has been 20 years of very close cooperation between UNHCR and Bulgaria and in particular it’s State Agency for Refugees under the Council of Ministers.

Throughout these years, the role of UNHCR has evolved from being an active actor in the field of asylum providing direct assistance to that of an advocacy office providing advice, support and training to all actors who are in contact with asylum seekers and refugees in Bulgaria such as the Chief Directorate of Border Police, the Directorate of Migration, the Judiciary, the Police and many others.

We have been actively involved in drafting the first ever asylum legislation in Bulgaria in the late 1990’s and we have supported and provided comments to legislations such as the Law on Refugees and the Law on Foreigners. We will continue to do so whenever there is a need to improve the legislation in line with internationally recognized refugee law standards as

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well as with the recast EU instruments on the Common European Asylum System which were adopted last Wednesday, on 12th of June.

UNHCR acknowledges the commitment of the Bulgaria in ensuring that access to its territory is guaranteed to all those who seek asylum and International Protection. In the last 20 years, 22715 persons from 97 countries applied for asylum in Bulgaria. 1542 were granted refugee status and 5088 were provided with Humanitarian status. We are also delighted that in April this year, for the first time since this possibility existed under the law, an asylum seeker was granted the Presidential Asylum. This marks, at the highest level of the State, the recognition that seeking asylum is indeed, as mentioned in Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Right, a Human Right that needs to be protected and reinforced.

This is particularly true in this period of time when one sees humanitarian crisis after humanitarian crisis develop around the world which results in millions of people having to still have to flee persecution and war. As I mentioned, Bulgaria has received through time many asylum seekers and has provided to them access to the territory and access to the refugee status procedure. It has opened receptions centers for those asylum seekers and developed a National Integration Program to enable and facilitate the integration into the Bulgarian society of those who are provided with either Refugee Status or Humanitarian Status. It has not always been easy and the conditions are not always ideal yet they have the merit of existing.

In this regards we cannot help but being concerned with the current reception capacity for asylum seekers in view of the steady increase in the number of asylum seekers that have arrived and are continuing to arrive in Bulgaria every day. In the first five months of this year, 1392 persons have applied for asylum, which is more than the total number for the whole of 2012. We are hopeful and confident that the State Agency for Refugees will be able to ensure that adequate and immediate solutions are found.

In addition to taking responsibility for the asylum seekers and refugees that are arriving by themselves into the country, Bulgaria has also committed itself to become a resettlement country by 2014. The State Agency for Refugees has been preparing its plans for the selection, reception and ultimate integration of a group of 20 refugees currently under UNHCR Mandate who cannot remain in the country where they first found asylum. In this regard, I was fortunate enough to attend the Resettlement Seminars that took place in Sofia in late May and early June of this year. The participation of key Ministries as well as of local municipalities is an encouraging sign that this resettlement may take place in the best conditions.

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It would be appropriate to mention that Bulgaria has, as well, shown its commitment to tackling the issue of Statelessness by becoming, in 2012, a Party to both statelessness conventions, to the 1954 Stateless Persons Convention and to the 1961 Reduction of Statelessness Convention. We are looking forward to working closely with the relevant State bodies for the establishment of the Status Determination Procedure for Stateless persons.

It is important now for me to end by mentioning that in addition to the crucial role of the State Institutions, of the State Agency for Refugees in the field of Asylum, that we should not forget to note the role, no less critical, of institutions such as the Bulgarian Red Cross that every single day provides assistance and support to asylum seekers and refugees, to all the NGO's who provide legal aid, counseling, social mediation and assist asylum seekers and refugees in better accessing state services as well monitoring the proper implementation of the asylum procedure. Finally one should not forget the numerous acts of individual kindness that the Bulgarian population through its tradition of tolerance provides to those who have come to seek protection in Bulgaria.

This goes from the Border Police Officer who pays from his own pocket for food for a family that has just been found after wandering for days along the Bulgarian Turkish border to the numerous young and enthusiastic volunteers that take of their free time to play and teach Bulgarian to refugee children.

Mrs. Vice President, Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me, on behalf of all those asylum seekers and refugees that have found protection and renewed hope in Bulgaria, to say thank you.