

AEGEAN REGION

Year 2020 in Review¹



Hygiene kits were delivered to refugee and host communities prioritizing persons with specific needs and individuals who lost their source of income due to COVID-19. ©BUCA District Municipality.

UNHCR supported the local authorities and partners to respond to the growing need for hygiene materials during the COVID-19 pandemic. Over **7,050 hygiene kits** were delivered to local authorities in the Aegean region including Izmir Metropolitan Municipality, Buca District Governorate, Buca District Municipality, Izmir Provincial Directorate of Religious Affairs, Yunusemre District Municipality as well as Doctors of the World (DDD) for further distribution to households of vulnerable refugee and host communities in Izmir and Manisa. Over 5,020 hygiene kits were handed to refugees, corresponding to around 70 per cent of the total distribution while delivery to host communities constituted around 30 per cent with 2,030 kits.



Around 53,400 humanitarian relief items

were provided to support the border authorities in responding to immediate humanitarian needs of persons rescued, intercepted and apprehended in the Aegean border region.



Over 2,750 individuals were assessed, counselled and referred to relevant services through municipal partners in cooperation with UNHCR in the Aegean Region.



UNHCR expanded its cooperation with local actors with new partnerships including **Izmir Metropolitan Municipality** and **Denizli Metropolitan Municipality** to promote inclusion of refugees into existing services.

¹ Provinces referred under Aegean Region include Izmir, Muğla, Manisa, Aydın, Denizli, Kütahya, Uşak, Isparta, Burdur and Antalya for the purpose of this report and relevance to the area of responsibility of UNHCR Izmir Office.

Major Achievements in 2020

Promoting Access to and the Provision of Protection

Protection-sensitive border management and cooperation with border actors:

Interception and rescue figures provided by the Turkish Coast Guard in the Aegean Sea borders in 2020 saw a considerable decrease with 66 per cent compared to those of 2019, with the majority of interceptions or rescue operations occurring off the coast of İzmir (54%) and Muğla (23%). Though figures indicate a slowdown in interception/rescue trends which can be attributed to the travel restrictions introduced by the Government of Turkey due to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as preventative measures at the sea borders of Greece, including pushbacks by the Hellenic Coast Guard, the sea border between Turkey and Greece maintained its importance with regards to the *mixed migration movements* towards Europe.

As part of its ongoing cooperation with the border authorities, UNHCR delivered over **53,400 humanitarian relief items** such as water, food packs, blankets, hygiene kits and diapers to Turkish authorities to meet the immediate humanitarian needs of persons rescued, intercepted and apprehended at the Aegean Sea borders of Turkey. UNHCR also supported key border authorities in Izmir and Muğla with *personal protective equipment and hygiene items* including **13,750 surgical masks, 300 masks, 42,500 latex gloves, and 300 litres of hand sanitizers** to help improve the working conditions of law enforcement as well as the reception conditions during the initial processing of intercepted, apprehended and rescued individuals. Efforts were also made to improve reception conditions in Izmir and Aydın where UNHCR provided a sub-hall tent, four accommodation and three water and sanitation facilities as well as equipment and office furniture.

Strengthening Protection and Access to Quality Services of Refugees with Specific Needs, including child protection services and the prevention and response to gender-based violence (GBV)

UNHCR works closely with partners in the field to better respond to the specific needs of persons at risk. In 2020, UNHCR conducted various activities to enhance the capacity of its partners.

UNHCR organized a **protection training** for eleven volunteers of Team International Assistance for Integration (TIAFI) in Izmir. Similarly, a **virtual protection training** was conducted in August for the newly established community-led organization, Afghan Solidarity Association (ASA), in Uşak with the participation of five ASA volunteers. Both trainings helped to increase the knowledge of volunteers on international protection, rights and obligations of persons under temporary and international protection status holders and applicants, child protection, GBV, education and UNHCR's CBI activities to better respond to the needs and queries of refugees.

Eleven social workers and translators from ASAM's mobile counselling team, which is supported by UNHCR, received a **capacity building training** in September and October. The training covered interview techniques, key points for interviews with persons with specific needs including structured

interviews with GBV survivors and people at risk of GBV and best interest procedures to develop the capacity of team members to undertake high quality interviews and best interest assessments.

In November and December, to mark the **16 Days of Activism against gender-based violence**, UNHCR and partners conducted online GBV awareness-raising sessions with the participation of 48 refugee and local community members. An additional 55 participants received phone counselling on Gender Based Violence/ Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (GBV/MHPSS) key messages. Moreover, a video was created based on the compiled answers of the refugee and host community members to the question “What happens if violence does not exist in the world?”

Cooperation with the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Services (MoFLSS):

UNHCR cooperated closely with the provincial directorates of Family, Labour and Social Services and its social service centres in Izmir, Muğla and Antalya. Throughout 2020, around 3,600 refugees benefitted from services by the social service centres through the support of UNHCR in the identification of persons with specific needs, case-processing, psychosocial counselling, social and financial assistance.

Communication with Communities:



Feedback Sessions held with the participation of refugees from Iran, Afghanistan and Syria ©UNHCR

In an effort to strengthen two-way communication with communities in Manisa and Kutahya in February, UNHCR organized four **feedback sessions** with 45 individuals from Iran, Afghanistan and Syria. UNHCR shared the findings of the focus group discussions (FGD) carried out in 2019, to inform refugees about remedial actions which were taken to address previously identified challenges and to hear further protection concerns, needs, observations and solutions proposed by refugees. Discussions focused on livelihoods, education, GBV, registration, health, social cohesion and access to information and communication channels.

During the feedback sessions, participants were able to learn from each other and to discuss with local and provincial authorities and NGO representatives who participated in the sessions. Also in February, UNHCR organized a **focus group discussion** with 10 female international protection applicants and status holders in Uşak on GBV, access to information on complaint and protection mechanisms, legal aid and assistance to hear their needs and proposed solutions, and also to inform them about existing services.

Although the prevailing COVID-19 situation led to a disruption in regular in-person FGDs, UNHCR explored alternative means to reach out to communities. UNHCR therefore conducted **online Survey** and **Consultation and Feedback Sessions** where 310 individuals from both refugee and host community participated to understand their needs and challenges faced during the pandemic as well as

their knowledge on available municipal services. Participants also shared their suggestions and feedback on content and quality of the service provision which fed into future interventions.

UNHCR initiated a WhatsApp Communications Tree to facilitate rapid and zero-cost information-sharing between UNHCR and refugees and asylum seekers on critical issues including, but not limited to, COVID-19 and earthquake response. As part of the initiative, two WhatsApp groups were created in Arabic and Farsi for the Aegean Region.

Engaging at the local level:

In 2020, UNHCR expanded its networks and cooperation with local municipalities in the Aegean Region to raise awareness on refugee rights and obligations, to expand outreach and facilitate the identification of persons with specific needs and support their inclusion in government services, and to foster social cohesion between refugees and the host community. UNHCR also maintained its close cooperation with the Isparta Social Service Association (SSA), Yunusemre District Municipality and Buca District Municipality through cooperation agreements established in 2019.

A Letter of Understanding was signed with **Izmir Metropolitan Municipality (IMM)** in August 2020, followed by the establishment of a Refugee Desk under the Department of Urban Justice and Equality. The cooperation with IMM was to strengthen refugees' and asylum-seekers' access to services as well as to support vulnerable host community members, thus promoting social cohesion. One of the initial activities of the refugee desk was a mapping of municipal services, and developing a multi-lingual 'City Guide' and 'Guide for Municipal Staff' to increase awareness of refugees and host community members on existing municipal services and inclusion of refugees into existing services.

Following the earthquake in Izmir on 30 October, UNHCR liaised with the local authorities to assess and identify the needs of refugees and to extend assistance to the authorities as needed. Refugee desk personnel were mobilized to support the earthquake response to ensure refugees were included in needs assessments and had access to available assistance. Some 190 refugees in five tent areas coordinated by Izmir Metropolitan Municipality were assessed and referred to relevant services. UNHCR also liaised closely with Izmir Provincial Directorate of Migration Management, the Turkish Red Crescent and Doctors of the World for the delivery of assistance and outreach activities to the people affected by the earthquake.

During the first two months of 2020, SSA in Isparta completed the project it had began in 2019, 'Hand to Hand for Them'. The project reached out to refugees and the local community through various cultural and sports activities to support refugees in language learning to enhance quality interaction with the local community and boost the capacity of the SSA in developing sustainable programs for the beneficiaries. Two excursions were organized in January 2020 for refugee and host communities in Isparta where a total of 137 children and adults enjoyed outdoor trips to the lake and ski resorts. The activity was an opportunity to promote social cohesion and two-way communication among communities.



Over 400 university students participated in the Multi-Programmed Social Cohesion Project for Refugees Workshop at Suleyman Demirel University ©SDU

UNHCR, Isparta SSA and Suleyman Demirel University organized the **Hand to Hand for Them: Multi-Programmed Social Cohesion Project for Refugees Workshop** in Isparta on 20-21 February, bringing together over 400 students and 22 academics from Izmir, Istanbul, Ankara, Denizli, Muğla, Isparta, Burdur, Antalya, Karaman, and Şırnak. During the workshop, academics presented findings of their research and way forward on international migration topics including aspects of forced displacement, environmental migration, social cohesion, and interdisciplinary approaches and methodologies in migration research.

The UNHCR-supported refugee support unit of Manisa's **Yunusemre District Municipality** carried out its identification, counselling and referral activities with a focus on protection as well as refugees' access to education. With the outbreak of COVID-19, the unit worked uninterruptedly to conduct needs assessments through phone calls and house visits. In 2020, some 530 persons with specific needs including children at risk or out of school, persons with disabilities, survivors of GBV and/or torture, persons with serious medical conditions, persons in need of legal and physical protection, including LGBTI persons, were identified, assessed and referred to the relevant services through the refugee support desk in Yunusemre. Of the identified out-of-school children, 14 were enrolled in schools and advocacy is ongoing with the support unit.

The refugee support desk established in Izmir's **Buca District Municipality** works on enhancing equal access to services, promote peaceful coexistence through protection, and support lifelong opportunities for refugees. In 2020, the refugee support desk in Buca provided counselling to over 1,300 refugees on access to services and identified 320 persons with specific needs referring them to relevant services. Moreover, some 160 individuals from the local service providers including the provincial directorates of Family, Labour and Social Services and National Education, mukhtars, schools, hospitals, non-governmental organizations, Social Assistance and Solidarity Foundations, and Public Education Centres (PEC) were provided with interpretation and counselling support by phone and through on-site visits.

UNHCR conducted two **consultation exercises with mukhtars and personnel of the Provincial Directorate of Religious Affairs** to observe the COVID-19 impact at the neighborhood level, to identify challenges faced by refugees as well as to explore the role and recommendations of mukhtars and imams. Two personnel of Provincial Directorate of Religious Affairs and 48 mukhtars from ten provinces in the Aegean region participated in the consultations in May and October. The consultations also provided an opportunity for awareness-raising on the assistance schemes by local and provincial authorities to enhance outreach to refugee populations in need.

Working towards Durable Solutions

Education:

As part of the cooperation with the Isparta SSA, with the support of Isparta PEC, 35 refugees benefitted from Turkish language and self-development courses in January and February. The courses enabled the participants to improve their skills up to A-1 level. Furthermore, 46 women from refugee and host communities attended handicraft courses during the same period.

Some 25 women under temporary and international protection participated in the Turkish language courses at the PEC in Manisa in cooperation with Yunusemre District Municipality. The course was suspended because of COVID-19 preventive measures; nevertheless, 40 refugee students aged between 17 and 28 received preparation books for the Foreign Student Examination (YOS). Additionally to support distance learning through Education Information Network (EBA), UNHCR provided 20 laptops for the newly established EBA Support Centre in the Yunusemre district of Manisa, where students with no computer or internet could access distance education and benefit from the education content of the EBA.

Self-reliance and livelihoods support:

UNHCR supported livelihoods activities aimed at integrating refugees into the labour market and promoting social cohesion. The **Learning-on-Site project** was implemented with **Denizli Metropolitan Municipality (DMM)** from March to December to provide language courses for refugees and vocational training for refugees and Turkish citizens. As part of the project, an industrial kitchen and child-friendly space were refurbished. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, language and vocational courses were postponed for two months. The first group of 24 project beneficiaries (12 of whom were Syrian) completed A2 level Turkish language course and 15 women attended online awareness-raising sessions with the city council's women assembly members. While participants attended the project activities, the child-friendly space offered a safe environment for their children to participate in recreational activities with children from the local community. Language and vocational courses will continue in the coming years, following the approval of the Turkish Employment Agency (İŞKUR) and the PECs once the COVID-19 measures are eased.



Refugee women attending A2 level Turkish language courses ©DMM

Monitoring the voluntary nature of self-organized returns:



309 Individuals

Observed by UNHCR for voluntary returns in 2020 in Izmir and Manisa

UNHCR observed voluntary return interviews of 164 families (309 individuals) in 2020 in Izmir and Manisa to ensure the voluntary nature of spontaneous returns of Syrian nationals. The most preferred destinations of return, according to the observations included Afrin,

Manbij, Azaz, Jarablus (Aleppo), Ar Raqqa, Al Hasakeh and Idlib. The main reason of return was identified as to reunite with family members. Other reasons included to take care of dependent family members and the inability to receive access financial or humanitarian support or assistance in Turkey.

Enhancing Partnerships and Coordination

In 2020, UNHCR stepped up its coordination efforts at the field level by establishing additional coordination platforms as well as expanding the participation to inter-agency platform across the various provinces in the Aegean Region and ensuring regular participation of municipalities and city councils. Accordingly, in line with the evolving needs in protection sector following the outbreak of COVID-19, a Protection Core Group (PCG), formed of NGOs, UN agencies, municipalities and city councils, was established in the second quarter of the year to coordinate the efforts of partners. The platform contributed to a more harmonized approach in responding to refugees' protection needs with increased communication and information dissemination among partners, especially in times of emergencies, such as during the earthquake.

In July, UNHCR provided a **briefing session to NATO personnel** on UNHCR Turkey's operation, field activities and the international legal framework on refugee protection, with special focus on international humanitarian law to familiarize NATO personnel with refugee protection. Other topics discussed included UNHCR's cooperation with border authorities in the context of mixed onward movements. The session was attended by 30 NATO military personnel from the Civil-Military Cooperation Division along with civil officers and an advisor on humanitarian issues.

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