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UNHCR: ASYLUM CLAIMS FALL TO LOWEST LEVEL SINCE 1988

GENEVA – The number of asylum seekers arriving in industrialized countries fell sharply for the third year in a row in 2004, reaching its lowest level for 16 years, according to annual figures released by the UN refugee agency on Tuesday.

The total number of asylum seekers arriving last year in the 38 industrialized countries for which comparable historical statistics are available was the lowest since 1988, at 368,000. In the six non-European countries included in this list, the combined total was the lowest since 1986. The numbers arriving in Europe are also back down to the levels of the late 1980s, although still higher than they were for a couple of years in the mid-1990s.

The number of asylum claims in industrialized countries fell by 22 percent in 2004, compounding a similarly steep decline last year. In the EU, the number fell by 19 percent, in North America by 26 percent and in Australia and New Zealand by 28 percent.

In most individual asylum countries, the 2004 total was the lowest for many years. In Germany, for example, the number is the lowest since 1984; in the U.S. and Switzerland, the lowest since 1987; and in the Netherlands, the lowest since 1988. And the number of asylum seekers arriving in the U.K. is back down to the levels of the early to mid 1990s, after plummeting 61 percent in two years.

“This really should reduce the pressure by politicians, media and the public to make asylum systems more and more restrictive to the point where many genuine refugees have enormous difficulty getting access to Europe, or getting recognized once they are there,” said Raymond Hall, Director of UNHCR’s Europe Bureau. “In most industrialized countries it should simply not be possible to claim there is a huge asylum crisis any more.”

The top receiving country in 2004 was France, with an estimated 61,600 asylum seekers. The United States, which was top receiving country last year, came second with 52,400. The UK fell to third with 40,200, and Germany -- the top asylum country in 13 of the past 20 years -- was in fourth place with 35,600. Canada came in fifth with 25,500.

A very different picture emerges when the number of asylum seekers is looked at relative to the size of the hosting country (as measured by total population). Using a per capita formula over the past five years, UNHCR ranks Cyprus, Austria, Sweden, Luxembourg and Ireland as the top receiving

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countries in the 25-member EU, with the UK, France and Germany all coming in mid-table.

For a few of the countries listed, including Cyprus, Finland, the Republic of Korea, Malta, Poland and the Slovak Republic, the number of asylum seekers in 2004 was the highest on record. Hidden among the general steep fall in numbers across the industrialized world, is the fact that the 10 new EU member states actually saw their combined total increase by 4 percent in 2004 (and by 18 percent in the last quarter of the year, compared to the previous quarter).

“Hopefully, with the numbers right down, most countries will now be able to devote more attention to improving the quality of their asylum systems, from the point of view of protecting refugees, rather than just cutting numbers,” said Hall. “The EU could also take a giant step forward by working towards a system of responsibility and burden sharing, so that next time there is a crisis they are in a much better position to help the worst affected among them. Even though they are generally much lower, the numbers are still very uneven across the EU. We need to watch what is happening in the new member states very carefully. Cyprus, the Slovak Republic and Malta are all countries with young asylum systems that are struggling to cope.”

The largest group of asylum seekers in 2004 was from the Russian Federation (30,100), the majority of whom are Chechens; followed by asylum seekers from Serbia and Montenegro (22,300), many of them from Kosovo; China (19,700); Turkey (16,200) and India (11,900). The ten leading asylum-seeker nationalities all recorded a significant drop in 2004. Perhaps most striking, the number of Afghans – the top group in 2001 with more than 50,000 asylum seekers – has fallen by 83 percent in the past three years. They now stand in 13th place with 8,800 asylum seekers in 2004.

“This is a clear reflection of the impact a concerted effort to improve conditions in the region of origin can have on the numbers seeking asylum further afield,” said Hall. “When Afghans saw things improving at home, they started going home in big numbers instead of travelling to Europe and beyond.”

The number of Iraqi asylum seekers has also fallen by 80 percent since 2002. However, half way through 2004 the number of Iraqis claiming asylum started to rise again, though not enough to lift them above ninth in the list of asylum-seeking nationalities by the end of the year.

All figures should be considered as provisional and subject to change.

The full 25-page report entitled “Asylum Levels and Trends in Industrialized Countries, 2004” is available at www.unhcr.ch

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