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ASYLUM NUMBERS IN INDUSTRIALIZED COUNTRIES PLUMMET IN 2003

GENEVA - The total number of asylum-seekers arriving in 36 industrialized countries last year fell by 20 percent to 463,000, the UN refugee agency announced Tuesday. It was the lowest total since 1997, and the third lowest since 1988.

In the European Union, the number of asylum-seekers dropped 22 percent from the previous year, to 288,000. This was also the lowest since 1997, and well under half the record total of 669,000 in 1992 during the wars in the Balkans. (No figures are available for Italy in 2003, so it is also excluded from the EU historical comparison).

"I welcome this news," said UN High Commissioner for Refugees Ruud Lubbers. "Most of the major groups of asylum-seekers - especially the Afghans, Iraqis and people from Serbia and Montenegro - have decreased in number, which reflects the significant changes in their home countries and regions. But we cannot relax yet. The improvements remain fragile in many countries, and there needs to be continued investment of aid and resources in the regions of origin to ensure that the trend is not reversed."

The top receiving country in 2003 was the United Kingdom with 61,050, followed closely by the United States, with 60,700. France received around 51,400 asylum-seekers, followed by Germany with 50,450. Most of the biggest receiving countries saw a sizeable decrease in the number of new asylum-seekers: the U.K. fell by 41 percent (almost twice the EU average); Germany by 29 percent, to its lowest total in 19 years; the Netherlands by 28 percent; the U.S. by 26 percent; and Austria by 18 percent.

It was the first time in 20 years that Germany has not been either top receiving industrialized country (15 times) or come in second (four times).

"In Europe in particular, the heated debate on asylum and the hardening of attitudes were to a considerable extent driven by the high numbers that arrived during the 1990s," Lubbers said. "Now that the numbers have dropped back to the levels we were seeing in the late 1980s, I hope the debate will focus once again on the vital need to protect refugees, as well as the need to find permanent solutions for them, and better ways to share the burden among states."

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Increases were for the most part confined to countries which receive relatively small numbers overall, including several states which will be joining the EU in May. Cyprus rose 364 percent, from 950 in 2002 to 4,410 in 2003; Malta rose 63 percent to 570; Slovenia was up 57 percent to 1,100; and the Czech Republic and Poland both rose by 34 percent to 11,390 and 6,920 respectively. Overall, the 10 states joining the EU saw an increase of 16 percent, from 32,100 to 37,300.

"This trend shows the importance of continuing to help the new EU member states build up their capacities," said Lubbers. "It also underlines the need to find common solutions in the form of burden-sharing at the European level."

Among current EU states, Luxembourg was up 49 percent to 1,550 and Greece was up 45 percent to 8,180. The French total was almost identical to the previous year. All other current EU member states saw a drop in numbers, as did Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

Russians - most of whom are Chechens -- were easily the top asylum-seeking nationality in 2003, with a total of 33,400 (data from 29 rather than the full 36 industrialized countries). Overall, the number of Russians increased by 68 percent. Across Europe as a whole, the number of Russian asylum-seekers rose by 73 percent (although in the EU the rise was limited to 34 percent). Russian asylum-seekers were concentrated in Austria (6,700), Poland (5,600) the Czech Republic (4,900), Germany (3,400) and Slovakia (2,700).

Among the top eight nationalities seeking asylum in 2003, Russians were the only one to increase. And of the top 39 nationalities, only four were higher than the previous year.

Iraqis, the top group in 2002 at 49,400, dropped by 50 percent to 24,700 in 2003. Although 4,200 Iraqis sought asylum in January 2003, by December the number had fallen to under 900. The number of Afghans arriving also dropped by 46 percent, to 13,800. This was down from 25,500 in 2002, and from a peak of 52,300 in 2001, when they were the top group. UNHCR has assisted more than 2.5 million Afghans to return to their homes since 2001. The top group from 1998 to 2000 -- asylum-seekers from Serbia and Montenegro (who include Kosovars) -- also fell by a further 23 percent last year, to 24,800.

A number of African countries which have seen a significant improvement in circumstances in recent years also saw important decreases, including Angolan asylum-seekers who dropped by 46 percent compared to 2002; Sierra Leoneans, who dropped by 58 percent; and asylum-seekers from the Democratic Republic of the Congo - where conditions have improved in several areas - who dropped 22 percent. Zimbabweans also fell by 52 percent - however this change is probably due more to the imposition of visa requirements in some destination countries, rather than an improvement in circumstances.

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Somalis, who increased by 7 percent, were the only major African asylum-seeking nationality to go up in 2003. Conditions in Somalia cannot be said to have improved, and the country effectively remains without a central government.

UNHCR stressed that all the figures were provisional and subject to change.

The full 25-page statistical report, called "Asylum levels and Trends: Europe and non-European Industrialized Countries, 2003," can be found at www.unhcr.ch

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