

Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR) programme resumes its activities despite COVID-19 global pandemic. Accomplishments presented in this newsletter are results of the joint efforts and close cooperation between IOM, the European Union, and the Governments of Austria, Denmark, Germany and the Netherlands.

There are 192 migrants willing to leave the Western Balkans and return to their homes and 151 of them are currently located in Bosnia and Herzegovina.



IOM BiH assists migrants' return to their homes

Nafis* (27) and **Fatma** (26) together with their three children, decided to leave Bosnia and Herzegovina and return to their homeland. Just over a year ago, they have departed Iraq. Youngest of their children was only three months old at the time. Their journey was anything but easy.

We flew from Iraq to Turkey. And that is when our horrors began; we entered the "game". A game with several levels. Our journey has been extremely tough, traveling with children who are now six, five, and one year old. Our youngest child had just been born then. We were forced to pay smugglers to cross multiple borders, and we have been trying to cross the sea illegally. From Turkey, we managed to reach a Greek island and from there to Albania, then Kosovo, Serbia, and finally we are now in BiH*," they tell the story of their arduous fate.

They say that they had a pleasant time in the Temporary Reception Centre Ušivak in Hadžići: they had food, clothing, the place was clean and their kids had somewhere to play... But the time came to return home, which happened on September 30, departing from Sarajevo International Airport with the support of IOM officers who provided transportation, travel documents and took care of other important details for their safe journey home.

"Fate has taught us the hard way to appreciate life," they said with tears in their eyes before leaving for Iraq.







* Names and identification details were altered for privacy protection and personal safety reasons.

** This designation is without prejudice to positions on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

IN 2020, 303 MIGRANTS VOLUNTARILY RETURNED FROM THE WESTERN BALKANS TO THEIR COUNTRY OF ORIGIN WITH THE HELP OF ASSISTED VOLUNTARY RETURN AND REINTEGRATION PROGRAMME.

Shown are the countries of origin with more than 10 returnees, beneficiaries of the AVRR programme.



| | | |
|--------------------|---|------------|
| Pakistan |  | 105 |
| Iraq |  | 36 |
| Morocco |  | 34 |
| Tunisia |  | 28 |
| Afghanistan |  | 21 |
| Algeria |  | 18 |

| Albania | BiH | Kosovo* | Montenegro | North Macedonia | Serbia | Grand total |
|----------|------------|----------|------------|-----------------|-----------|-------------|
| 2 | 227 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 67 | 303 |

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MIGRANTS OUTSIDE OF RECEPTION CENTERS



The COVID-19 pandemic and its consequences have changed the lives of people all over the world. However, migrants have been affected by this crisis much more than others. To protect people on the move who reside outside the official reception centers, in forests, abandoned buildings, and public spaces, AVRR teams have joined the IOM's mobile humanitarian teams that distribute food and non-food items necessary for survival.

It is estimated that more than 3,000 migrants and refugees in Bosnia and Herzegovina sleep outdoors and that they cannot be placed in the existing official reception centres in Bosnia and Herzegovina due to overcrowding and the closure of the official reception center "Bira" by local authorities in the Una-Sana Canton.

In Serbia, the number of migrants accommodated in reception and asylum centers did not significantly change over the last months. Average number of beneficiaries accommodated in reception centers per month is around 6000-6500 of migrants and asylum seekers. Despite available accommodation capacities in reception centers in Serbia, number of migrants residing outside of the centers is still noticeable, and is between 1000 and 1200, predominantly in the border areas. Commissariat for Refugees and Migration has organized, on several occasions, transportation of persons residing outside of the centers within the border areas to the reception centers, but migrants were still

In the coming period, mobile humanitarian teams in Bosnia and Herzegovina will distribute sleeping bags, warm blankets, food packages, winter clothes and shoes, hygiene and other necessities for staying outdoors during the winter.



repeatedly returning to the initial locations. In reception and asylum centers, all informations are available to migrants and asylum seekers regarding procedures, protection systems, COVID-19 epidemic situation etc. IOM teams in Serbia are providing support to the teams of Commissariat for Refugees and Migration, as well as directly to migrants in the reception centers, by organizing regular info sessions and individual counselling in relation to the assisted voluntary return program. In 2020, despite all challenges imposed by COVID-19 epidemic, assisted voluntary return was provided to 67 migrants.

It is estimated that more than 200 migrants, mostly from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) regions, are currently stranded in Kosovo* and have not been accommodated in any existing centre, while all the migrants in Montenegro are accommodated in official reception centres.

Northern Macedonia continues to apply quarantine measures at Temporary Transit Center (TTC) Vinojug in Gevgelija for the incoming migrants, making interaction and communication with migrants even more difficult and challenging, however, the AVRR info teams utilize various media to spread basic information on COVID-19 protection as well as information about Country of Origin (CoO), and also provide AVRR counseling. Irregular migrants transiting through Albania either stay in cheap hostels or as groups in apartments or find shelter in makeshift residences.

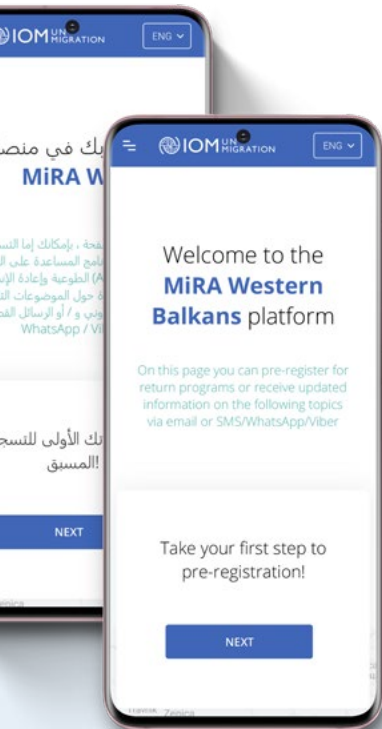
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Within the project “Regional Support to Protection-Sensitive Migration Management in the Western Balkans and Turkey – Phase II”, funded by the European Union, over the past four years IOM, in cooperation with partners in the Western Balkans, has worked to bridge the gap and operationalize a comprehensive migration management system in the Western Balkans, as well as to provide support for the continued improvement of regulatory frameworks and capacities for the implementation of Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR).

Ever since 2015, the need for the consolidation of the national migration governance systems in the Western Balkans has been amplified by the large and sudden arrivals of migrants to the region. In addition to providing immediate humanitarian assistance, IOM was also called upon to assist project participants to setup protection mechanisms, including those enabling assisted voluntary return and reintegration (AVRR) of migrants who wish to return to their country of origin. Until recently, the region did not have a mechanism to support AVRR, both institutionally and operationally. At the onset of what was to become a changed migration situation in the region, there was an increase in requests from migrants deciding to return home and IOM engaged with the governments across the region on the development of standard operating procedures (SOPs) to support the organization of AVRR.

Furthermore, the advancement of this framework contributes to the project participants’ readiness to fulfill their commitments as signatories of the Global Compact on Migration (GCM), also signed by all countries of the Western Balkans, says Donatella Bradić, Regional team leader for migration management in the WB.



NEW DIGITAL PLATFORMS: MiRA WESTERN BALKANS

Starting next year, migrants in the Western Balkans will have the opportunity to pre-register for return to their country of origin via the online application MiRA Western Balkans (Migration Registration Application) and leave an e-mail or telephone contact to receive information on relevant matters.



A difficult and challenging year is behind us, however, it seems that many more challenges and unknowns await us.

We hope that 2021 will bring you good health, happiness, success, and new accomplishments.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Program (AVRR) wish you Happy New year.



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