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Refugee resettlement to Baltic states: “not easy, but possible”

Debate in Riga discusses preconditions of more Baltic involvement in global refugee protection

A debate on refugee resettlement to the Baltic states held in Riga on 11-12 May 2009 brought together some 30 governmental representatives, MPs, representatives of the UN refugee agency UNHCR and civil society organisations from Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The debate was the second of a series of debates on refugee resettlement, which the Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) is organising in 2009 with partners across the EU. The debates take place in anticipation of a common EU resettlement scheme, which the European Commission is expected to propose in July this year.

The debate in Riga took stock of the current involvement of all three Baltic states in refugee protection through asylum. At the same time, it provided space for reflection as to how and when the three Baltic states could become involved in refugee resettlement. Representatives of the Latvian Citizenship and Immigration office underlined that their country could, in the future, participate in a joint EU resettlement effort. For the time being, however, the background of the economic crisis provided an inopportune moment for starting such an involvement. Members of the Estonian and Latvian parliament as well as NGOs from all three countries highlighted the need of better informing the general public in the Baltic on refugee issues in order to build support for an involvement in refugee resettlement. In a case study, a representative of the Czech Refugee Facilities Administration reported about the process which had enabled the Czech Republic to become the first post-communist country to establish a resettlement programme.

In order to prepare the ground for a future involvement of the Baltic countries in resettlement, participants agreed on follow-up activities on a national level. These included plans for awareness-raising activities on global refugee issues among Estonian MPs, the re-establishment of a coordination meeting on refugee issues in Latvia and the convocation of an NGO-government round table on resettlement in Lithuania.

Torsten Moritz, Executive Secretary of CCME, expressed appreciation for the open discussion on a Baltic approach towards resettlement programmes: “We have clearly identified what steps need to be taken before the first of the Baltic states will start resettlement. The debate shows that getting resettlement started by countries in this region will not not be easy, but also that it will be possible”, he commented after the event.

Note to editors:

Refugee resettlement is the process by which refugees who have to flee their home country and find initial, but insufficient or temporary protection in another country, are resettled into a third country and find permanent protection and a durable, sustainable solution there. While around one hundred thousand refugees are annually resettled to the US, Canada and Australia, resettlement is since the 1960ies scarcely used in Europe: currently only eight EU member states carry out resettlement, resettling around 4.000 refugees annually. The Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) is since 2004 actively promoting resettlement as an additional tool for refugee protection in Europe.

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The views expressed and information provided by the project and the partners involved do not necessarily reflect the point of view of the European Commission and do in no way fall under the responsibility of the European Commission.

The Churches' Commission for Migrants in Europe (CCME) is the ecumenical agency on migration and integration, asylum and refugees, and against racism and discrimination in Europe. Members are Anglican, Orthodox and Protestant Churches and Councils of Churches as well as church-related agencies across Europe. CCME formally cooperates with the Conference of European Churches and the World Council of Churches.