

OVERVIEW: SAFETY ZONE FOR UNACCOMPANIED ASYLUM-SEEKING CHILDREN IN RRC SOFIA - VOENNA RAMPA



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MISSION IN BULGARIA

Address: 77, Tzar Asen St., Sofia, Bulgaria

Phone: +359 2 93 94 774

Fax: +359 2 93 94 788

Email: iomsfia@iom.int

Website: www.iom.bg

Facebook: www.facebook.com/IOMBulgaria

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International Organization for Migration (IOM)
The UN Migration Agency

**Фонд „Убежище, миграция
и интеграция“
Asylum, Migration and
Integration Fund**



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Renovation works and physical disposition

The establishment of the Safety Zones for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) by the International Organization for Migration's Mission in Bulgaria was undertaken as part of two projects funded under the European Union's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund Emergency measures: "Strengthening the national capacity of the Republic of Bulgaria in the fields of asylum and migration" and "Protection of vulnerable migrants and assisted voluntary return and reintegration support".

IOM Bulgaria renovated three floors, including rooms, corridors, and common toilets and showers, in the State Agency for Refugees' (SAR) Registration and Reception Center (RRC) Sofia - Voenna Rampa for the purpose of setting up the first of its kind in Bulgaria Safety Zone for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC). There are a total number of 25 rooms with capacity of 4 UASC each, for a total capacity of the Safety Zone of 100. One of the rooms, located next to the office of IOM's social workers on the first floor, is specifically designated for girls. There are three offices - one on each floor - for IOM staff and one room for individual consultations. On the bottom floor there is also an office for the security staff, equipped with video surveillance for the cameras that are distributed throughout the Safety Zone.

All rooms and offices have been fully furnished and equipped by IOM. The UASC are also provided with a free Wi-Fi network in order to be able to stay in touch with relatives and friends in their home countries and elsewhere.

An official opening was organized by IOM and the SAR at the end of May 2019 to present the Safety Zone to partner institutions and organizations, including the Ministry of the Interior, UNICEF, UNHCR, national and international NGOs and others.

For the purpose of group and recreational activities, IOM and the UASC have access to a computer room and a gymnasium in the RRC.

IOM Bulgaria is opening a second Safety Zone for UASC in RRC Sofia - Ovcha Koupel in January 2020. Renovation works were completed at the end of September 2019 and staff has been recruited. A security company will be contracted for the provision of security services, in accordance with IOM procurement procedures. The total capacity of the Safety Zone in RRC Sofia - Ovcha Koupel is 138 UASC.

photo credit (opposite page): Nikolay Doychinov





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The renovation works were carried out under the Project
„Protection of vulnerable migrants and assisted voluntary return and reintegration support“
In the framework of the Agreement between European Commission and
International Organization for Migration № HOME/2016/AMIF/AG/EMAS0050.



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Methodology

The work in the Safety Zone is structured based on the “Methodology on the Conditions and Organization of the Social Support Provided in the Safety Zones for Unaccompanied Asylum-seeking Children” that was drafted by IOM Bulgaria, and partners and key stakeholders provided input during the drafting stage.

The methodology outlines the responsibilities of IOM, SAR and the Security staff, including registration and accommodation, provision of support to meet the fundamental needs of the UASC accommodated in the Safety Zone (e.g. food, health, education), case management, the organization of group and recreational activities and safety and security. The methodology has taken into account SAR rules and regulations for the accommodation of asylum seekers in RRCs, and includes rules specific to the Safety Zone that each child is explained upon registration, in a language that he/she understands and sanctions should the rules be violated, and is expected to follow throughout their stay.

It also includes templates for the various documents and tools used for the work in the Safety Zone, including registration form, individual care plan, attendance sheet, etc.

The methodology is a living document and it is planned that it should be periodically revised and updated, based on a constant monitoring and evaluation of the work and tools being used.

Staff

IOM social workers, under the supervision of the Safety Zone Coordinator, provide 24-hour 7-days per week care and support to the UASC accommodated in the Safety Zone in RRC Sofia - Voenna Rampa, in coordination with the SAR. They work in day, night and weekend shifts based on a work schedule that is planned each month. Each social worker has a certain number of UASC assigned to him/her. The social workers and the security team received an induction training at the beginning of June 2019, prior to being deployed in the Safety Zone, during which were presented the methodology of the Safety Zone, IOM's PSEA policy, and the Bulgarian Red Cross provided a First Aid training. The social workers are responsible for the registration and accommodation of UASC, case management, distribution of non-food items (NFIs), accompaniment to medical facilities, organization of group activities, attendance verification and, in general, ensuring that UASC follow the rules of the Safety Zone and respect the daily schedule of the zone.

IOM's mobile protection teams and IOM's social mediator also provide daily support in the Safety Zone, including social, psychological and legal consultations, distribution of NFIs, accompaniment to medical facilities and other types of support based on identified needs. They have a supporting role, as per needs identified by the Safety Zone team - they provide additional, specialized support, especially in the form of psychological and legal consultations, while the social workers from the mobile protection teams works closely with those assigned specifically to the Safety Zone in order to fill any gaps that may arise and address needs where mobility is a requirement.



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Interpreters

The Safety Zone social workers, meet once per week for a team meeting with the Safety Zone Coordinator in order to discuss cases, administrative and logistics issues, planned activities and any other issues and challenges.

Security

IOM works with a security company - SOT 161 - that deployed a security team of 8 guards that ensures 24-hour 7-days per week security and video surveillance. The security guards ensure the safety of the UASC accommodated in the zone, respond to any incidents that may occur, accompany the IOM social workers for presence verification in the morning and evening, and do rounds on each floor of the Safety Zone each 30 minutes.

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Registration and accommodation

The Safety Zone opened officially on the 17th of June 2019, with the accommodation of the first 20 UASC.

Since the opening and until the 12th of December 2019, 196 UASC were registered and accommodated in the Safety Zone. In terms of nationalities breakdown, this number includes 176 boys from Afghanistan, 6 from Iran and 14 from Pakistan. At any given time, there is an average of 30 UASC residing in the Safety Zone.

Upon registration, each UASC is explained in a language that he understands the rules of the Safety Zone and sanctions for their violation.

As accommodation in RRCs in Sofia is based on nationalities and RRC Sofia - Voenna Rampa accommodates the above three nationalities, UASC with nationalities such as Syria, Iraq, and so on, have not been accommodated there. They will be housed in the Safety Zone in RRC Sofia - Ovcha Koupel once it opens.

No girls have been accommodated in the Safety Zone in RRC Sofia - Voenna Rampa as there have not been any unaccompanied asylum-seeking girls from the above-mentioned nationalities.



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Provision of support, recreational activities, access to basic services

Daily schedule

The work and care provided in the zone are structured based on a daily schedule that includes morning physical exercise, personal hygiene, three meals, cleaning of the bedrooms and common areas, laundry and organization of and participation in different group activities - educational, sports, music, art, literature and movie nights.

There is a curfew from 22:00 to 8:00 from 1st of May until 31st of October, and 20:00 to 8:00 from 1st of November until 30th of April, as per SAR rules and regulations. The remainder of the time, Safety Zone residents can leave the zone and RRC freely. IOM's social workers conduct attendance verification each night at curfew time and in the morning before the lifting of the curfew.

Group activities

IOM staff organize different group activities for the UASC, including sports - cricket, volleyball, football, badminton and basketball; board games and puzzles; arts and crafts workshops; music club to learn to play guitar; literature club - reading and discussing short stories; movie nights; providing support for homework to UASC who attend school.

As mentioned above, there are no common spaces for group activities in the Safety Zone and the gym and computer room located elsewhere in the RRC are used for this purpose. In order to have a space to sit, play games or just chat, IOM support-



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ed a few of the boys to paint several pallets for chairs and tables, and one of the boys who has good sewing skills made cushions out of materials purchased by IOM.

Obligatory presentations on the topics “The Culture of Bulgaria”, “European Social Norms”, “Prevention of Aggression”, “The Human Body”, “Good Hygiene Practices” and “Services provided in RRC Sofia - Voenna Rampa” are carried out by Safety Zone social workers.

UASC accommodated in the Safety Zone have also been invited to participate in activities organized by municipalities outside of the RRC, such as a football tournament with children from local schools and a performance of dances from different countries.

IOM organized a visit to the Sofia Zoo for the UASC on Sofia Day (September 17th). The children also participated in the yearly one-day campaign “Let’s clean up Bulgaria Together”.

Food

The SAR is responsible for the provision of 3 meals per day to the UASC accommodated in the Safety Zone, the same as all other asylum seekers accommodated in the RRC. The food is transported to the RRC by a catering company and, if any allergies or other specific diet needs are identified by IOM’s social workers upon registration, the SAR is notified, and the catering company takes these into account.



photo credit: IOM Bulgaria



Health

There is a doctor in the RRC that can provide basic medical assistance, such as examination and provision of basic medication but he is not allowed to write prescriptions. There have been a number of medical emergencies - panic attacks, fainting, serious injuries - that have necessitated the calling of an ambulance. Other than that, for regular checkups and appointments, and not so serious injuries, the UASC are accompanied either by IOM social workers (both Safety Zone and mobile teams), SAR or Bulgarian Red Cross (BRC) social workers to the relevant medical facility. The UASC are registered in the national health insurance system. Costs not covered by the system are covered by IOM and SAR, and IOM, SAR and the BRC purchase medicines, as needed, when a UASC receives a prescription for such. IOM's psychologist books appointments and accompanies UASC to psychiatric evaluations when the need arises.

Community meetings

Once per week, IOM organizes a community meeting with all the UASC accommodated in the Safety Zone in order to provide them with information, to receive their feedback - hear their requests, suggestions and complaints, if any, and provide feedback on those from the week before. SAR staff are also invited to participate in the meetings.

Bonus point system

A bonus point system was launched to encourage the minors accommodated in the Safety Zone to respect the rules and get involved in the life and activities organized there. An average of 10 UASC participate in the system each week and in exchange for the points they have accrued during the week, they receive different items, such as clothes (of their choice), food, fans, cups, tea kettles and other.

Education

At the start of the school year on the 16th of September 2019, 10 boys from the Zone started to attend school. Safety Zone social workers call the teachers of each child once per week in order to verify attendance, participation and behavior, and whether they have homework.

Case management

Safety Zone social workers have prepared 73 individual care plans for boys ac-

accommodated in the Zone, that include basic information about the child, his social history, interests with regards to education, training, recreational/sports activities, specific medical needs and other information.

IOM's mobile protection teams also provide psychological and legal support to UASC accommodated in the Safety Zone.

NFI distribution

The SAR provides bed sheets, a blanket and a pillow, as well as basic hygiene kit and cleaning kit to each UASC upon registration. IOM provides additional hygiene items, as needed. Safety Zone social workers, mobile protection teams and the SAR distribute clothes and shoes based on assessed needs.



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Coordination

IOM coordinates daily its work with the SAR management of the RRC, 4 SAR social workers in the RRC who are assigned UASC under their responsibility and 2 SAR accommodation staff.

Coordination is also ensured with other organizations working in the RRC, such as CARITAS who organize education activities, the Bulgarian Red Cross who provide social support and the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee who provide legal support, especially for Dublin family reunification.

Challenges

1. There's a large turnover rate of the UASC accommodated in the Safety Zone, as, for them, Bulgaria is a transit country, with the exception of those waiting for a decision on their Dublin family reunification procedure. This is one of the reasons why the implementation of the individual care plans has proved very difficult. One possible solution is to make these plans and implement them only for UASC waiting for Dublin family reunification procedures as this ensures that they will remain in Bulgaria for a longer time.
2. General practitioners refuse to register UASC (as well as other asylum seekers) due to their inability to de-register them once they leave Bulgaria without prior notification due to the way the Bulgarian health system operates. The SAR and IOM have so far found one GP who is willing to register UASC but, as other GPs, he has a limited quota allowance.
3. As this is the first of its kind Safety Zone for UASC in Bulgaria, there is no other model to step on and study from, and even though IOM Bulgaria has visited Safety Zones managed by IOM Greece, as well as some in Belgium managed by Fedasil, the context in Bulgaria is very different and the models from other countries not so easily adaptable locally. This means that there is a longer work adaptation period that requires continuous updating of the tools and methodology.
4. Many of the UASC accommodated in the Safety Zone, as many other UASC who have reached Europe, have experienced significant traumatic events in their countries of origin - conflict, violence, extreme poverty - or on their way to Bulgaria, including at the hands of smugglers and they required extensive psychological and, at times, psychiatric support. IOM's psychologists from the mobile protection teams provide psychological support and links have been made with children's psychiatrist for the provision of relevant and adequate support.
5. As most of the UASC are boys between the ages of 13 and 17, motivating them to clean, go to school and participate in group activities - this requires constant monitoring, encouragement and one-on-one discussions, ensured by the 24/7 presence and care provided by IOM staff in the Safety Zone.

Contacts

INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATION FOR MIGRATION (IOM)
MISSION IN BULGARIA

Address: 77, Tzar Asen St., Sofia

Phone: +359 2 93 94 774 | Fax: +359 2 93 94 788

E-mail: iomsofia@iom.int | www.iom.bg

Facebook: www.facebook.com/IOMBulgaria

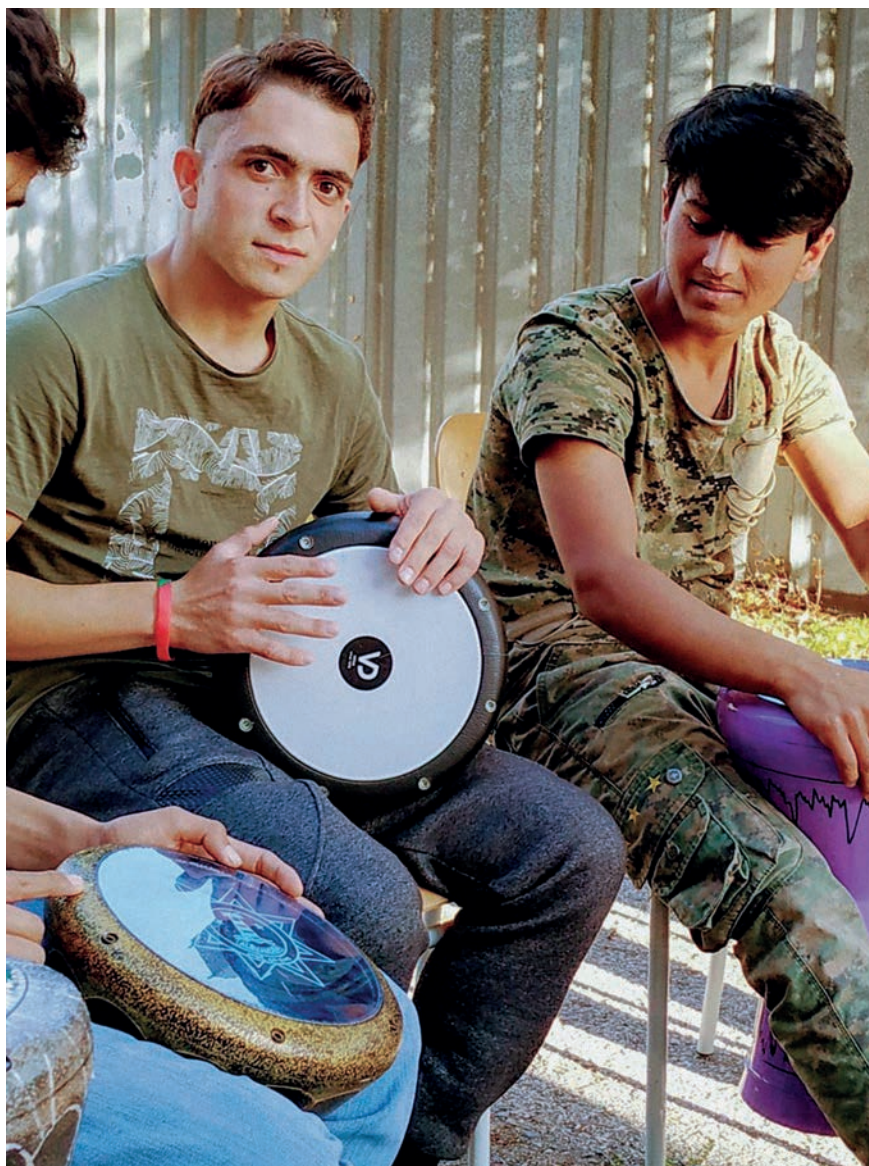


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