

# The Emergency Transit Centre in Romania



Bringing refugees to safety



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## **Preface**

In May 2008, a unique facility was created in the western Romanian town of Timișoara. The Emergency Transit Centre (ETC), set up pursuant to a Tri-Partite Agreement concluded by the Government of Romania, UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), is a residential facility which can host up to 200 refugees. Its *raison d'être* is to provide a safe place for the short-term stay of refugees who have been identified by UNHCR in other countries as being in urgent need of resettlement, but who cannot remain in those countries for resettlement processing because of acute problems including security considerations, the risk of *refoulement*, or serious impediments to UNHCR's activities on their behalf.

In other words, the ETC provides a safety net when refugees are at risk and resettlement procedures cannot be completed elsewhere. Unfortunately, this situation arises all too often, given the reduction of humanitarian space and asylum possibilities in the face of conflict, concerns about transnational crime, security and irregular migration. Men, women and children in need of international protection find it ever more difficult to reach safety. The Government of Romania recognized these challenges and agreed to collaborate with international partners to set up a centre to facilitate resettlement of some of the world's most vulnerable refugees. The ETC enables UNHCR to bring refugees to protection when protection is not available in their first country of asylum.

The ETC operates thanks not only to the commitment of the parties to the Tri-Partite Agreement, but also with the energetic engagement of *Generație Tânără*, a Romanian non-governmental organization and UNHCR's implementing partner in the Centre, as well as resettlement countries, international donors, and Romanian citizens living nearby.

Resettlement countries can visit the ETC to conduct interviews with candidates for resettlement under the best possible conditions. Medical examinations and treatment can be carried out. Refugees can attend classes providing orientation to their new resettlement countries. Their physical and mental well-being is

attended to in equal measure in a relaxed and convivial atmosphere, free of the tensions and fear which the refugees experienced during their flight and in many cases, also in their first countries of asylum.

The ETC is admirable testimony to Romania's dedication to the protection of refugees. It is also a practical implementation by Romania of international solidarity and responsibility-sharing. The Centre makes a vital difference in the lives of the refugees who pass through its doors. As one of the first refugees to arrive in the Centre said, "life starts anew in Timișoara." We are pleased to collaborate in making this innovative protection tool a success.

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## How the ETC came into being

According to the Statute of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the organization's functions are to provide international protection to refugees who fall under its mandate and to work with governments and other partners to find permanent solutions for refugee problems. The three possible solutions are voluntary repatriation, local integration or resettlement to a third country.

Resettlement may be the only viable solution when there are no prospects for refugees to return to their home countries or to integrate in their first country of asylum. Indeed, in some cases refugees face serious and immediate risks to their security and well-being in the first country in which they sought refuge, and resettlement to another country becomes urgent. More information on refugee resettlement can be found at <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4a16b1676.html>

With this reality in mind, the Emergency Transit Centre, located in Timișoara, Romania, was set up for the specific purpose of providing temporary accommodation to refugees in need of evacuation from their first country of refuge, pending their onward resettlement to a country of permanent settlement. Evacuation may be needed to assure the physical safety of refugees, to protect those threatened by *refoulement* and to meet the needs of especially vulnerable individuals.

In addition, it is sometimes the case that refugees in need of resettlement are located in places that are inaccessible to States for reasons related to safety and the security of officials of the resettlement country. It may also be that the authorities of the country where the refugees are located are not willing to allow access to the refugees. This is frequently the case when the refugees are being held in detention. Thus, even when a resettlement country is ready and



willing to engage in resettlement on an urgent basis, it may not be possible to carry out the necessary procedures in the places where the refugees are located.

The ETC was inspired by a number of past experiences. In the 1980s, in Southeast Asia, a standby arrangement for the disembarkation and resettlement of Vietnamese boat people rescued at sea was developed and implemented. In 1999 and 2000, some 1,500 Tutsi refugees who were at risk in the Democratic Republic of the Congo were evacuated to Benin and Cameroon for interviews by resettlement countries. Also in 1999-2002, a first evacuation to Romania took place, when over 4,500 refugees from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia were moved to Timișoara for resettlement processing by other countries. Some years later, in 2005 and 2006, the Romanian authorities again offered to host a particularly vulnerable group of refugees and enabled UNHCR to transfer 450 Uzbek refugees to Romania from Kyrgyzstan. All were resettled to other countries. More recently, in 2008, just before the formal opening of the Centre, 38 Eritrean refugees who had been detained in Libya were transferred to Romania for resettlement processing.

These *ad hoc* operations revealed the need for a more predictable and systematic mechanism. The past experience of successful collaboration between Romania,



New playground funded by private donor.

UNHCR/B. Szandelski/2009

UNHCR and IOM made it possible to envisage addressing an acute protection gap through the establishment of a standing arrangement in Timișoara for the temporary stay of refugees with emergency needs pending resettlement to a third country. Thus the ETC was born.

The Romanian authorities chose Timișoara for this humanitarian operation because of the city's international airport, its tolerant, multicultural and cosmopolitan population, as well as its dynamic economy and active civil society. Moreover, the Timișoara facilities offer good living conditions for refugees, and the staff had already gained valuable experience in this field over the years.

## The Tri-Partite Agreement

On 8 May 2008 the Tri-Partite Agreement establishing the Emergency Transit Centre (ETC) in Timișoara was signed by Romania, IOM and UNHCR. It entered into force on 21 November 2008. The text of the agreement is available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/docid/4a7c221c2.html>. The full title of the Agreement refers to the “temporary evacuation to Romania of persons in urgent need of international protection and their onward resettlement.” The Agreement outlines the roles of the Parties. UNHCR is responsible for identifying the persons in need of evacuation, providing certification of their refugee status, and securing their onward resettlement. In addition, UNHCR is to provide the resources needed to cover the costs of food and domestic items, psycho-social support, educational and recreational activities, as well as language training and necessary medical



Palestinian refugees at the Emergency Transit Centre in Timișoara, Romania, participating in the “Who is from the UK?” lesson.

IOM Romania/2009

care. For the implementation of most of these activities UNHCR cooperates with a local NGO partner, Generație Tânără (Young Generation).

IOM handles the transportation of the refugees to Romania and from Romania to their resettlement countries, as well as health screenings on arrival in situations where the health status was not assessed prior to the evacuation journey, medical examinations for resettlement purposes and brief pre-embarkation medical checks before the final departure. During the stay at the ETC, IOM provides cultural orientation programmes to help the refugees prepare for resettlement.

The Government of Romania provides the premises for accommodation in Timișoara, issues identity documents for the refugees who are transferred to the ETC, and is responsible for maintaining order at the Centre. While UNHCR identifies the refugees in need of evacuation, the Romanian Immigration Office (RIO) has the final say on whether to allow their entry to Romania, giving its answer within seven working days which brings speed and predictability to the process. According to the Romanian law ratifying the Agreement, the refugees transferred to the ETC may enter Romania without visas.

The Agreement sets an upper limit of 200 refugees who may be accommodated at the ETC at any given time. The maximum period for refugees' stay in Romania is six months, although individual exceptions may be made for up to 20 refugees when necessary.

Candidates for transfer to Romania are persons who are considered by UNHCR to be in urgent need of evacuation in order to ensure their international protection.



Refugee mother and child happy to be together in safety.

UNHCR/B. Szandelski/2009

This includes the following categories:

- ✓ Refugees at immediate risk of *refoulement* or facing other acute, life-threatening situations;
- ✓ Refugees who are held in detention in another country solely because they entered or are staying without authorization, and who will be released only if they are able to depart from the country;
- ✓ Refugees whose cases are particularly sensitive or high profile;
- ✓ Refugees for whom resettlement processing cannot be completed in the first country of asylum, for instance due to security threats;
- ✓ Refugees for whom the resettlement country or UNHCR has decided not to disclose the resettlement destination to the first country of asylum.

## Finding safety at the ETC: the first two groups

### *The Sudanese refugees from Iraq*

The first group of refugees evacuated to the ETC under the Tri-Partite Agreement were 139 Sudanese who had been stranded in precarious circumstances in a tented camp in the Iraqi desert for four years. The first Sudanese arrived on 16 December 2008; by the end of June 2009 all but a handful awaiting medical clearance had left Romania to start new lives elsewhere.

These refugees had a unique history. They were originally from the troubled Darfur region of Sudan but had been living in Iraq for many years, most of them since the 1980s. However, by 2005 their situation in Iraq had become untenable. Like many other foreign nationals, they found themselves targeted by insurgent groups. Unlike other foreign nationals in Iraq, they could not safely return home. In May 2005, the group tried to flee from Iraq to Jordan, but they were prevented from entering Jordan and found themselves stranded under very difficult

conditions at a spot called Kilometer 70 (K-70) near the border, next to a busy highway.

In addition to the harsh desert conditions of the area where their makeshift camp was set up, a place which is subject to severe sandstorms and extreme temperatures, insurgents operated in the area and posed a serious risk to the refugees. As voluntary repatriation to Darfur was not an option, UNHCR decided to seek resettlement for the refugees. However, access to this group was extremely problematic given the security situation and their isolated location. Their evacuation to the ETC was the only way out. After their departure, it was possible to close the K-70 camp, which demonstrates the strategic benefit of this solution.

When the refugees arrived at the ETC in the middle of the night, after a gruelling 20-hour journey by bus and plane, they were assigned to their rooms and slept

*We could not leave the camp in Iraq. The moment Iraqis saw our dark skin, they would attack us. It was horrible.*

Hamid, age 17, a Sudanese refugee who was evacuated to the ETC from K-70 camp in Iraq.

peacefully for the first time in many years. Still, social workers found many of them initially were too traumatised to leave their rooms. It took a few days for them to realise that it was safe for them to move about the camp, or even to go to downtown Timișoara on visits organised by the camp management.

## *Palestinian refugees from Iraq*

The next group to find safety at the ETC in Timișoara were Palestinian refugees evacuated from another camp in the Iraqi desert, a place called Al Waleed, located close to Iraq's border with Syria. For years this group of mainly women and children had been living under extremely harsh conditions after fleeing Baghdad. Although under the Saddam Hussein regime Palestinian refugees had lived peacefully in and around Baghdad, after 2003 they found themselves targets of extreme violence and abuse. Some managed to cross into Syria, but many



Refugee children play  
in the snow for the first time.

UNHCR/F. Chiu/2009

others were stranded at Al Waleed and in another camp in the no man's land between Iraq and Syria, a place called Al Tanf. At these sites refugees faced not only dangers from snakes and scorpions, sandstorms, and extremes of heat and cold, but also total isolation and inadequate living conditions.

After their arrival at the ETC, the first group of Palestinian refugees expressed their joy to be somewhere where they could enjoy freedom of movement, receive medical care and where the children could play out of doors.

Resettlement processing started almost immediately, with most of the first group of Palestinians moving to new homes in the United Kingdom and in the United States of America.



Al Waleed Camp in Iraq.

UNHCR Iraq/2009

## Daily life at the ETC

When refugees arrive at the ETC, they are received by staff of UNHCR and IOM, and of UNHCR's implementing partner Generație Tânără. They are immediately registered and all refugees aged 14 and over are fingerprinted, with the data stored in a database maintained by the Romanian authorities.

Generație Tânără provides services to the refugees during their stay. On arrival, everyone is provided with bed sheets, towels and personal hygiene items. Clothing is provided as needed, including thanks to a generous in-kind donation from Hennes & Mauritz. Through a local caterer, Generație Tânără makes sure that the refugees enjoy three nutritious meals per day, also taking into account their food preferences. Throughout their stay at the Centre, refugees benefit from cultural orientation activities specific to each resettlement country.

*Here, I do not mind the winter nor the cold. We are staying in proper buildings and the rooms are warm.*

A Sudanese refugee, viewing her first wintery landscape in Timișoara.

For the time being, men and women (with children) are housed in separate dormitories, but plans for the construction of family units, funded by UNHCR, are well advanced. The ETC is equipped with prayer rooms, leisure space for women and for men, a sports hall and sports fields and a play area for children. Microsoft generously donated computers for the refugees to use.

Generație Tânără also organizes trips to Timișoara during which refugees can visit the city, make purchases and attend religious services. UNHCR encourages refugees to participate in activities and voluntary work opportunities in and around the Centre. In an example which predates the establishment of the ETC but which is remembered by the inhabitants of the region, in early 2006 a group of Uzbek refugees rolled up their sleeves to assist villagers affected by terrible floods in Romania.

The needs of children are well met. A well-equipped playground was provided by UNICEF and Save the Children. Toys and books donated by the public are handed out and the children have a television room which also serves as a playroom.



*We are so happy that for the first time in three years our children can play on a normal playground.*

A Palestinian mother.

UNHCR/B. Szandelski/2009

Generație Tânără also makes sure that refugees have access to the medical services they need. Doctors working for Generație Tânără make regular visits to the ETC, and transportation to and from the hospital in Timișoara or visits to specialists are organized by the NGO. Refugees are provided with Generație Tânără's contact information, and in the event of an emergency, the organization's staff can be reached at all times.

Once they have settled in at the ETC, refugees are counselled by UNHCR staff members and staff of Romania's Immigration Office about their rights and obligations during their stay in the Centre. The most important obligation of refugees living in the ETC is to respect the Centre's Internal Regulation, which means respecting the established programs, maintaining order, not consuming alcohol or illegal drugs, nor damaging or destroying property. Refugees staying at the ETC are naturally obliged to respect Romanian law in the field of public order and national security.

All refugees transferred to the ETC receive temporary identity documents issued by the Romanian authorities, which allow them to remain in and move within Romania. The temporary identity document is valid for six months, and can be extended in special situations under the conditions provided for in the Agreement.

The residents require approval from the Romanian authorities to leave the ETC,

and may do so accompanied by UNHCR or Generație Tânără staff members. They travel for both personal and resettlement-related reasons to the city of Timișoara and beyond, for instance for medical appointments, to go shopping, to participate in cultural orientation activities and for leisure activities.

## Arrangements for missions from resettlement countries

In most cases, a resettlement country which has agreed in principle to resettle refugees from the ETC will wish to visit the ETC to conduct interviews and other resettlement-related formalities. In such a case, the resettlement country



Leisure activities in the Center.

UNHCR/B. Szandelski/2009

will inform UNHCR and IOM staff working at the ETC of the planned arrival of personnel responsible for the resettlement procedure, and the related information. UNHCR informs the Centre management in writing to ensure that the officials will have access to the Centre and that no time is lost.

Space is allotted in the Centre for officials from resettlement countries to conduct interviews, and to photograph and fingerprint refugees as needed. Where required, the ETC offers interpretation services from a pool of available interpreters. UNHCR is planning to establish facilities for interviewing by video link, to further simplify the process.

## The European Union and the ETC

The EU plays an active role in implementing responsibility-sharing policies in the area of refugee protection. While some EU Member States have been involved in

resettlement since the 1940s and 1950s, the development of resettlement at an EU level is only very recent. An important occasion in EU resettlement was the presentation of the European Commission Policy Plan on Asylum in June 2008. The Policy Plan set a 2009 timeline for proposals on a common EU resettlement scheme, Protected Entry Procedures and Regional Protection Programs. Since the issuance of the Policy Plan, resettlement has entered into mainstream discussions in the EU and increasing interest of EU Member States in resettlement has been witnessed. At present, the following EU Member States have active resettlement programs: the Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland, the Netherlands, Portugal, Romania, Sweden and the UK. In 2008, EU Member States collectively resettled around 4,400 refugees (or 6.7% of the global total of resettled refugees). In the last year, more EU countries have shown interest in resettlement.

The European Asylum Support Office (EASO), which is in the process of being established, is likely to play an important coordinating role regarding practical cooperation on resettlement, based upon a Communication for a Joint EU Resettlement Scheme expected in September 2009.

In anticipation of the establishment of a joint EU Resettlement Scheme, IOM will implement a project, together with UNHCR and the International Catholic Migration Commission, funded under the European Refugee Fund, which aims at promoting further practical cooperation between EU resettlement countries. While the project will cover all phases of the regular resettlement process, the project aims in particular at enhancing and coordinating resettlement activities of EU member states by making use of the ETC.

The ETC is located in one of the EU's newest Member States and presents a new model of active role in refugee resettlement, open to cooperation with other EU Member States. The ETC offers opportunities for coordinated resettlement activities to make selection of refugees more efficient and cost-effective, e.g. by using video links for interviewing refugees, centrally organized medical assessments, cultural orientation and in case of larger groups, language classes. The ETC can also form a platform of practical cooperation and mutual learning among project participating EU Member States, enabling the development of coordination mechanisms in resettlement.

## Looking ahead

The establishment of an Emergency Transit Centre is a significant contribution to refugee protection. The Parties to the Tri-Partite Agreement are grateful for the financial support, in particular from the United States of America, which made it possible to launch the operation of this Centre. Further support will be needed for 2010 and beyond.

The ETC allows the transfer to safety of persons who would otherwise not receive the protection they need in a timely manner. It enables UNHCR and IOM to provide assistance to refugees who are in the most precarious situations,



Leisure activities in the Center.

UNHCR/B. Szandelski/2009

particularly those whose life, liberty or integrity are at risk in their first country of asylum.

The ETC gives refugees a chance to live a normal life while awaiting resettlement. For the resettlement countries, the Centre offers the possibility of carrying out resettlement procedures in optimal conditions. These procedures include cultural orientation courses and language classes which help refugees to prepare for life in their new countries.

The Parties to the Agreement encourage other countries to participate in this unique venture by resettling refugees from the ETC. They also hope that other governments will follow the example of the Government of Romania and, consistent with the principles of international solidarity and responsibility-sharing, work with UNHCR and IOM to establish similar facilities in other parts of the world.

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