

HIGHLIGHTS

Logistics facility where migrants were sheltered near Belarus-Poland border was closed.

As of 31 March, **350 people benefited from Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration (AVRR)** in 2022, **98 of whom boarded a charter flight** organized by IOM on 22 March

The IOM-supported hotline on safe migration and combatting human trafficking received around **100 requests for information on entry to/transit through/exit from Belarus** from Ukrainian refugees and third country nationals fleeing the war.



IOM staff consulting AVRR beneficiaries before charter flight to Erbil © IOM 2022

SITUATION OVERVIEW

On 21 March, the **Bruzgi logistics facility**, which operates near the Belarus-Poland border and has provided temporary accommodation to over 1,500 stranded migrants since November 2021, **stopped working**, with no preliminary information or notification from the authorities. **The majority of the stranded migrants are now residing in the forest areas of urban settlements and continue to approach IOM for further assistance and support.** As of 17 March, around 400 people were still at the logistics centre before it was shut down.



People returning to Iraq through AVRR programme awaiting security check at the airport © IOM 2022

On 22 March, **98 people departed to Iraq through an IOM-organized charter flight.** Of these persons, 49 were transported from the logistics facility to Minsk by IOM before 17 March. From 17-21 March, six more people registered for AVRR at the logistics centre.

During the reporting period, IOM registered an increased **number of Cuban citizens applying for AVRR**; 15 people have already registered for the programme and are awaiting the departure. More migrants from Cuba are expected to arrive in Belarus while in transit to the EU due to the newly established visa-free regime between Russia and Cuba.

CONTACTS

Ukrainian refugees and third country nationals fleeing the war continue to enter Belarus from the Ukraine-Belarus border, as well as through transit from Poland, Lithuania and Latvia, though the highest number of entries remain from countries neighbouring Ukraine.

According to the State Border Committee of Belarus, from 18-31 March, 8,775 people entered Belarus from Ukraine. **Since 24 February, 11,804 people entered Belarus from Ukraine** (902 Belarusians, 10,658 Ukrainians and 244 third-country nationals).

The Belarus State Border Committee (SBC) announced that **Belarus will grant visa-free entry to, transit through, and exit from the country** to "foreign nationals" displaced from Ukraine and seeking to return to their countries of permanent residence. Visa-free travel to Belarus will be valid until April 15.

CURRENT RESPONSE ACTIVITIES

An ad-hoc meeting of the UN Refugee and Migrant Task Force was convened and chaired by IOM on 22 March due to the closure of the logistics facility at the Belarus-Poland border. The Task Force members exchanged information regarding the closure of the reception centre and discussed mechanisms to provide further support to the stranded migrants. Members decided to temporarily suspend the work of the UN Task Force, to be restarted when the situation demands.

IOM continues to support and respond to the needs of stranded migrants, who are located both in the forest areas and in urban settlements, **with food, non-food items, medical support, as well as voluntary return to the country of origin** if requested.

People learn about IOM from friends, relatives, IOM-produced online and offline materials, such as leaflets, social media publications, etc. They approach the organization in various ways: via email, social media, phone calls to AVRR consultants and Grodno staff, or by coming to the premises in Minsk or Grodno. The absolute majority of migrants approach IOM on their own, though sometimes they are also referred to IOM by partner NGOs or police.



Man approaching IOM staff for a consultation © IOM 2022



Woman talking on the phone in the hotel in Minsk before departure through the AVRR programme © IOM 2022

HEALTH ASSISTANCE

Health assistance to migrants at the logistics facility in Bruzgi was provided until the day of its closure. From 18-21 March, **two people were referred to healthcare organizations** to obtain specialized care for pain relief caused by acute complication of renal stone disease and to get proper obstetric care after childbirth. **Four people received medications** bought by IOM in accordance with prescriptions made by a general practitioner. In the reporting period, IOM-trained staff provided **psychological first aid (PFA) to 15 migrants** at the logistics facility. The main concerns expressed were anxiety and stress caused by uncertainty and living conditions. Three people were tested through IOM's adapted Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9).

For migrants located at the hotel near Minsk Airport, **medications were provided to 26 persons, one person was referred to a clinic** with an arm fracture, and **17 migrants were provided with psychological first aid** to stabilize their psychological conditions before departure.

Prior to the charter flight organized by IOM, **pre-embarkation checks (PEC)** were conducted for 98 people. As per procedure, PEC included COVID-19 PCR testing, a COVID-19 symptoms check, a physical examination, and the identification of any urgent medical interventions that could prevent the person from traveling. All the returnees were found fit to travel.

HUMANITARIAN AID

On 18 March, **120kg pitta bread, 77kg bananas and 77kg apples** were delivered to the migrants stranded in the logistics facility in Bruzgi.

IOM staff continued their work in Grodno to ensure further support. Since the closure of the logistics facility, Grodno staff have received **28 requests for assistance**, mainly by phone. People are in need of food items, non-food items, shelter, and support to return to their countries of origin. When possible, food and hygiene kits were provided by the IOM staff to the vulnerable migrants, totaling 52 kits. This was done jointly with the partner NGO, the Belarusian Movement of Medical Workers (BMMW). Counselling on the AVRR programme and other solutions for the migrants were provided.



IOM delivering food and hygiene kits to BRC to be further distributed among refugees and third country nationals fleeing Ukraine © IOM 2022

In the reporting period, IOM provided around **1,600 meals** to the AVRR beneficiaries accommodated at the hotel in Minsk and awaiting departure to countries of origins. There were 125 migrants in the hotel before the charter flight on 22 March and there are currently **34 people still at the hotel**. Migrants were also provided with water, medical masks, and hygiene items, such as shampoo, shower gels, razors, and sanitary pads.

In addition, IOM Belarus delivers food and non-food items to the AVRR applicants accommodated in the urban hostel in Minsk on a weekly basis. Currently, **31 migrants from Cuba, Ghana, Democratic Republic of the Congo, Algeria, Burkina Faso, and Guinea** are awaiting departure in the hostel.

On 18 March, IOM delivered **75 food kits and 75 hygiene kits** to Gomel for further distribution to Ukrainian refugees and third-country nationals. Food kits contained canned beef, canned fish, water, biscuits, pasta, and crisp bread. Hygiene kits included a toothbrush, toothpaste, toilet paper, wet wipes, napkins, medical masks, hand gel, washing powder, shampoo, shower gel, paper towels, and a towel.

On 31 March, **75 food kits and 75 more hygiene kits** were delivered to the Gomel branch of the BRC, to be further distributed among refugees and third country nationals fleeing Ukraine.



Children eating their lunch at the logistics facility near Belarus-Poland border before it was closed © IOM 2022

ASSISTED VOLUNTARY RETURN AND REINTEGRATION (AVRR)

On 22 March, IOM organized the **first charter flight from Minsk to Erbil for 98 migrants** returning to Iraq through the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration programme. IOM assisted with the transport of 49 migrants from Bruzgi logistics facility to Minsk while 49 additional people approached IOM from other locations. In Minsk, all migrants were provided with medical check-ups, and received pre-departure assistance, including cash assistance. The charter safely landed in Erbil that same day and upon arrival, returnees were met by IOM staff and provided with onward transportation to Dohuk, Sulaymaniyah and Erbil by the airport authorities. IOM Iraq, with support from the European Union, will provide eligible returnees with post-arrival and reintegration support, including individual counseling, economic reintegration assistance, and support to access specialized services such as mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS).

One of the passengers on board the charter flight was a **17-year-old boy from Iraq** who arrived in Belarus in October 2021 with a group of friends and relatives but was separated as an accompanied minor and was referred to IOM.

IOM Belarus accommodated the boy in a hotel in Minsk and ensured that he received regular meals, access to clean water, sanitation facilities, medical support, and MHPSS, alongside other necessary assistance, such as clothing suitable for cold weather conditions.

The boy has an uncle in Iraq who acts as the boy's caregiver and decided to return home.

To evaluate whether voluntary return to Iraq was in the child's best interests, IOM initiated the Best Interest Determination (BID) procedure. It was the first time that such a procedure for a minor migrant was organized in Belarus and therefore IOM conducted a family assessment to make sure that the boy's uncle and family were able and willing to accept and take care of the child.

A special BID panel consisting of IOM, UNHCR, and UNICEF, as well as relevant representatives of public associations, was convened to discuss various options available for the child, including voluntary return to Iraq, relocation to another country, and local integration.

Based on the family tracing results and assessment, the willingness of the minor to reunite with his family and community, his irregular status in Belarus, lack of other legal options for continuing the journey, and risks related to further irregular migration, the BID panel concluded that voluntary return to Iraq was the best option for the boy. IOM and participating partners prioritized the child's psycho-social stability and believed that his supportive family relations would provide the best opportunity to successfully reintegrate into his community.

After staying in Belarus for 5 months, the boy returned home. In Erbil, the boy was met by IOM Iraq staff and his uncle, who took him home to Duhok.



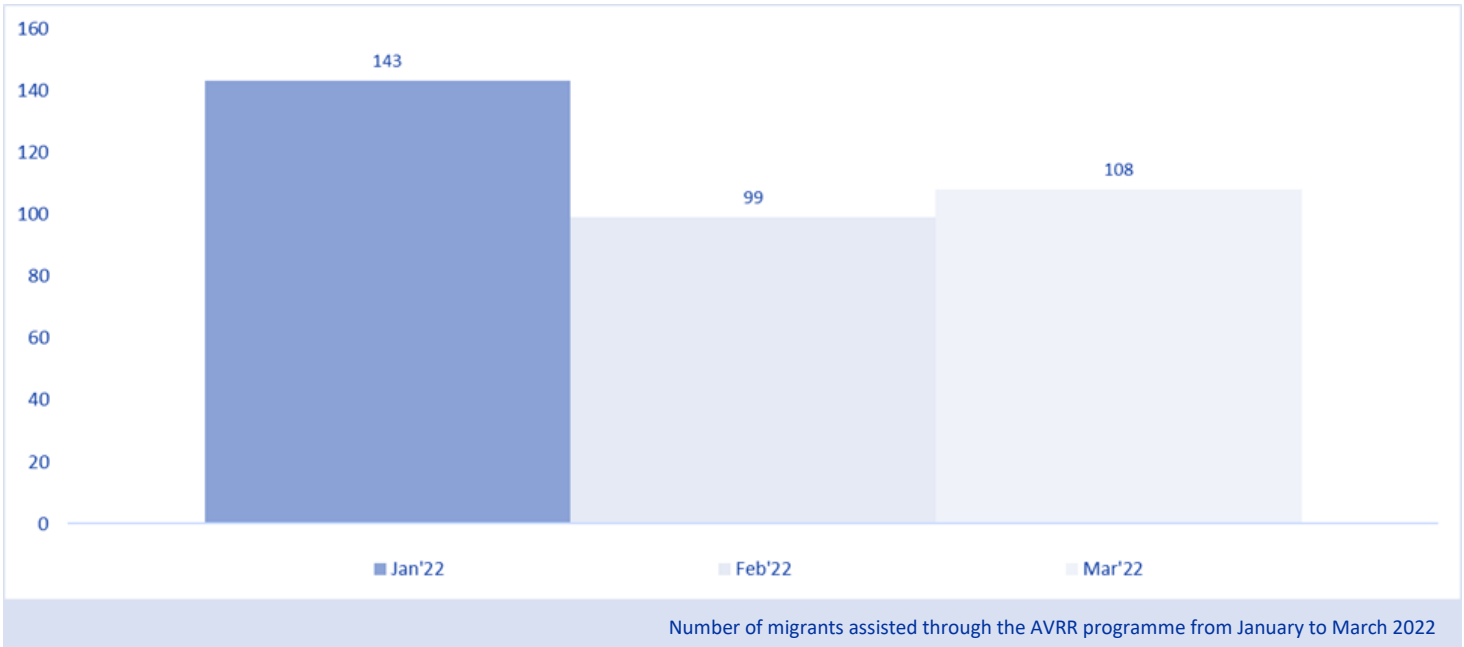
Boy from Iraq during interview with IOM staff © IOM 2022



Boy's uncle and his wife welcoming IOM staff conducting family tracing © IOM 2022

IOM provided AVRR to ten more migrants from other countries: four Nigerian nationals, four Sri Lankan nationals, one Ghanaian national and one national of the Russian Federation. IOM staff ensured a **medical escort** for one of the Sri Lankan nationals, who had a severe leg injury. IOM also helped **restore travel documents** for two Sri Lankan nationals.

Currently, 31 people remain at the hostel and 34 are accommodated in the hotel, both in Minsk, and are awaiting departures through AVRR. As of 18 March, **IOM Belarus has provided AVRR for 350 migrants** (248 males, 102 females), including 91 children, in 2022. Most of the returnees were Iraqi nationals (88.6%). Other AVRR beneficiaries returned to Sri Lanka, Turkey, India, Cameroon, Nigeria, Moldova, Iran, Egypt, Somalia, Republic of the Congo, Cuba, Russia, Algeria and Ghana.



COOPERATION WITH PARTNERS

During the reporting period, IOM's partner NGO, the Belarusian Movement of Medical Workers, continued counseling services through AVRR to urban and stranded migrants in Grodno, with a total number of 88 consultations provided. BMWW also assisted IOM staff in Grodno with the delivery of 52 kits containing food and hygiene items to vulnerable migrants in Grodno region.

Three trainings were held in Grodno for volunteers by another NGO partner, the Belarusian Red Cross (BRC). One of the training courses was devoted to the provision of PFA, and two others covered the topic of basic first aid. On average, fifteen people increased their skills in each of the training sessions, for a total of 45 volunteers trained.

UKRAINE RESPONSE

During the reporting period, IOM investigated various options to support vulnerable people arriving from Ukraine.

On 18 March 2022, **IOM**, together with UNHCR, UNICEF, UNDP and UNFPA, **visited a regional reception centre in Gomel city**, which is located close to the Belarus-Poland border. Agencies' representatives also visited four sanatoriums, which are used as temporary residences for Ukrainian refugees.

On the same day, IOM **delivered 150 bags consisting of food items and hygiene kits** to Gomel branch of the Belarusian Red Cross, IOM's partner NGO that has an established presence at the Belarus-Ukraine border. They installed two heated tents at the border to provide first aid support, however, many refugees require additional support, including food, clothing, shelter, medical, and psychological assistance.



IOM staff delivering humanitarian aid for people fleeing the war through the Belarusian Red Cross © IOM 2022

IOM will be scaling up its response activities to ensure that refugees' and migrants' needs are met. The humanitarian assistance delivered by IOM was further distributed among Ukrainian refugees and third country nationals. In addition, IOM distributed **contact information leaflets among third country nationals arriving to Belarus** to raise awareness about the opportunity to safely return to their home countries. On 31 March, **150 more bags with food and hygiene items** were delivered to the Gomel BRC office and will further be distributed.

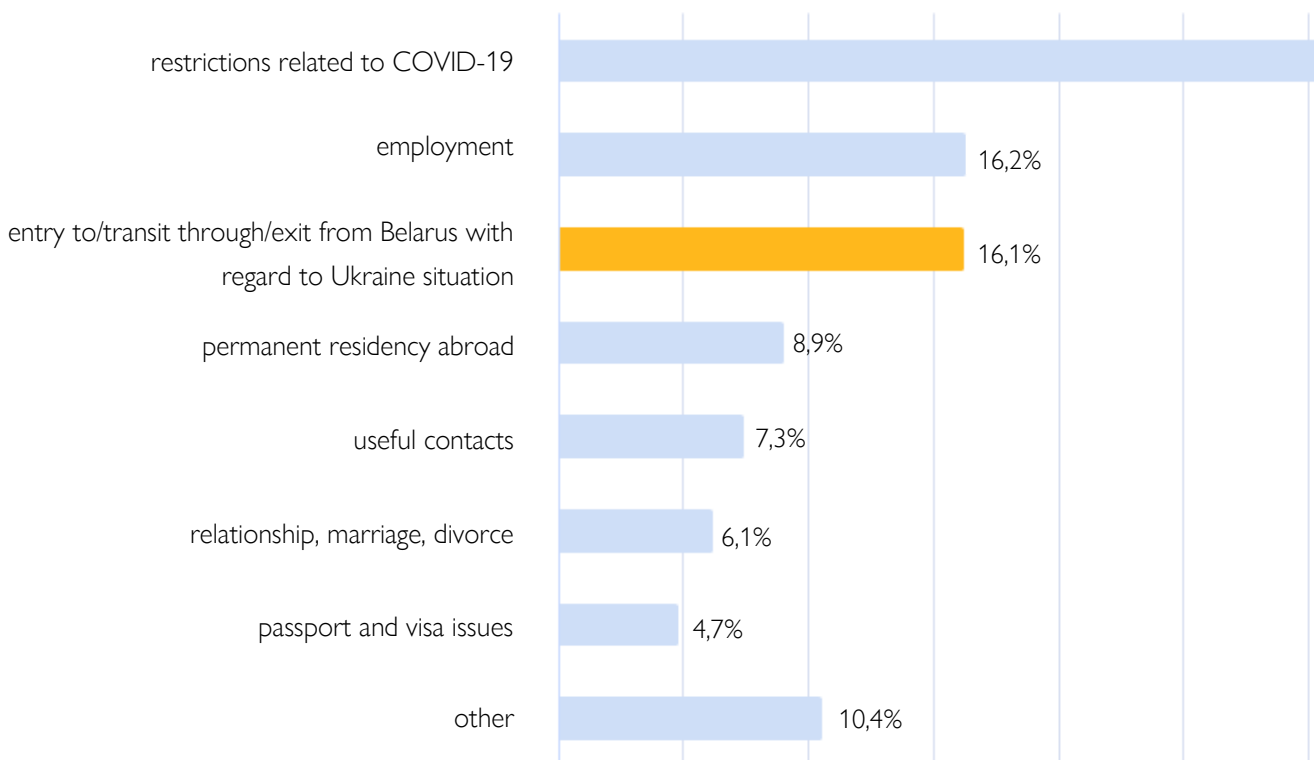
BRC carries out its response activities at two border crossing points in the Gomel region (Novaya Guta and Gden). On 19 March, an additional tent camp was established near the village of Poddobryanka in the Gomel region. BRC's staff and volunteers provide hot meals and PFA to displaced persons fleeing the war. The number of refugees and third country nationals entering Belarus from Ukraine is growing every day and further increase is expected.

IOM's next visit to Gomel is planned for the upcoming reporting period, to plan the establishment of IOM's presence in Gomel to monitor the situation and provide an effective and timely response.

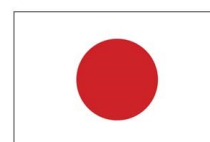
IOM took part in the Refugee Coordination Forum (RCF) on a weekly basis, with participation of BRC and involvement of governmental institutions such as Ministry of Internal Affairs. A list of needs to support refugees and third country nationals fleeing the war was prepared by BRC and was subject to discussion during the latest meetings of the RCF.

IOM Belarus supported its **first case of a third country national** (citizen of the Russian Federation) **who fled the war to Belarus** and was referred to IOM by the immigration police in the city of Brest.

The **IOM-supported hotline on safe migration** managed by the NGO "Business Women Club" located in Brest city **is receiving an increased number of requests from people fleeing Ukraine and their relatives in Belarus**. During the reporting period, the hotline received a total of 121 queries, 22 of which were related to the issues of entry to/transit through/exit from Belarus with regard to the war (roughly 20 per cent). This is a growing trend, compared to 15 per cent of Ukraine-related calls two weeks ago and 13 per cent of related calls three weeks ago.



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