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UNHCR regrets the lowering of international protection standards in the Republic of Cyprus



Nicosia, Cyprus – The Cyprus Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) today expressed concern about new changes in the refugee legislation that curtail essential rights of forcibly displaced people who have sought sanctuary in Cyprus. “We are disappointed

that Cyprus has lowered down its standards when it comes to the protection of persons fleeing war and generalized violence,” says Mr. Damtew Dessalegne, the UNHCR Representative in Cyprus.

The new law published on the Official Gazette of the Republic yesterday takes away family reunification rights and protection against expulsion from persons granted subsidiary protection instead of refugee status. These are people compelled to leave or remain outside their home country on account of threats to their lives or freedom resulting from armed conflicts or generalized violence.

UNHCR considers that the humanitarian needs of persons benefiting from subsidiary protection are not different from those of refugees. Indeed the convergence of the two protection statuses was one of the objectives and outcomes of the reformed EU legislation adopted in December 2011 after long and complex negotiations. Most recently, the European Commission has also issued specific guidelines on family reunification requiring Member States to grant similar rights and entitlements to refugees and beneficiaries of subsidiary protection.

The new refugee law also restricts the rights of refugees to enjoy family life in two ways. Firstly, only refugees who had their family relationships formed prior to their entry to Cyprus can enjoy this right. Secondly, they must submit their application for family reunification within three months after the granting of their refugee status. Both of these limitations do not sufficiently take into account the specific situation of refugees, and may prove to be a serious obstacle to family reunification.

“International protection is first and foremost about meeting the needs of vulnerable and threatened individuals and families who had to flee persecution, torture, generalized violence or the breakdown of law and order,” says Mr. Dessalegne. “It is about affording them the opportunity to live a safe and dignified life. Too often we run the risk of losing sight of this when we debate refugee legislation and policy,” Mr. Dessalegne adds.

During the deliberations in the Internal Affairs Committee of the House of Representatives, UNHCR has made a detailed [written submission](#) explaining the need to revise certain aspects of the proposed legislation in order to ensure its full conformity with international protection principles and best practice. UNHCR has done so as the body mandated by the United Nations General Assembly to provide international protection and to supervise governments' compliance with the relevant legal instruments for the protection of refugees.

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