



BELGIUM



In November 2009, one year after closing its programme of access to healthcare for undocumented migrants, MSF set up a refugee camp in the centre of Brussels to highlight the political gridlock around reception and accommodation of asylum seekers in Belgium. European and Belgian legislation dictates that asylum seekers should get access to adequate reception, including housing, once they have submitted an official asylum request. But government housing has been full to saturation since last year. As a consequence, asylum seekers are not only out on the streets but also do not get any other services such as access to healthcare.

CONTEXT

Belgium experienced a peak in asylum requests in 2000, when more than 42,000 asylum requests were initiated. In 2008, 12,252 asylum requests were made; in 2009 this number will be higher. In 2009, the top three countries of origin of asylum seekers in Belgium were Afghanistan, Russia (Chechnya) and Iraq. Asylum requests are handled by different governmental institutions in Belgium: the Commissioner-General for Refugees manages the asylum procedure, while the Federal Agency for Asylum Seekers (Fedasil) provides material assistance. Since the introduction of the new Asylum legislation in 2006, asylum seekers receive only material assistance, not financial help. Housing, accommodation and healthcare are part of this assistance package, which is managed by Fedasil or other implementing partners. Asylum seekers spend four months in a so-called “open reception centre” before being allocated private accommodation suited to their needs.

MSF IN BELGIUM

On the morning of 18 November 2009, a team of 40 MSF volunteers set up a refugee camp in central Brussels. MSF had been called upon by a coalition of NGO’s, who sought

publicly to put pressure on the government to assume its legal responsibilities to accommodate asylum seekers. After repeated requests to the government to resolve the ongoing housing crisis went unheard, the refugee camp was intended to show explicitly the consequences and urgency of the plight of homeless asylum seekers, whose right to housing is no longer guaranteed.

The camp was a symbolic act, and never intended to serve as an alternative to the accommodation otherwise provided by the Belgian government. With a maximum capacity of 60 persons, admission criteria were established to ensure that those housed in the camp were the most vulnerable of the homeless asylum seekers, including single women, families and minors. Over the course of five days, 276 people stayed at the camp, most of them qualifying as particularly vulnerable persons.

The camp was timed to coincide with the KERN, reduced Belgian Council of Ministers meeting, ahead of the EU summit nominating the incumbent Belgian Prime Minister as the President of the European Council. The coalition of NGO’s succeeded in obtaining a guarantee of housing for 450 asylum seekers as a temporary emergency measure, on top of the accommodation that will become available at the end of December and in the course of 2010.

Accommodation was also guaranteed for the beneficiaries who sought refuge in the MSF refugee camp. However, despite our efforts, the housing problem persists. MSF will continue to collaborate with other NGO's to ensure that

the Belgium government heeds its promise to identify more accommodation options to meet the needs of migrants.



“When I came (to Belgium) the Ministry took my finger prints and data. I arrived 18 days ago. I had no place to go and no food. For 18 days I slept in the railway station, under the bridge or in construction areas. We slept 2-3 hours until the station closes and then went back around 4 or 5 o'clock when the station opens again. Every day we ask Fedasil to give us accommodation. For food we sometimes ask Pakistanis and Afghans, who sometimes give us some Euros to help us out. All this time we were on the streets.”

AFGHAN REFUGEE IN BELGIUM, INTERVIEWED IN THE MSF CAMP IN BRUSSELS, 12 NOVEMBER 2009.

“We took many cars, trucks and buses. Many times we were covered up. Day and night looked the same. We were sometimes completely covered, with small holes for breathing. The smugglers did not want to give us the names of the places we were passing. Sometimes we did not eat for two, three days.... At a certain point we arrived in Istanbul. We stayed for 20-25 days in a covered house. We could not go out. I managed to go out twice because I speak English. Many did not go out for 25 days. If you obey the smugglers they are ok, if not they beat you.”

AFGHAN REFUGEE IN BELGIUM, INTERVIEWED IN THE MSF CAMP IN BRUSSELS, 12 NOVEMBER 2009.

