



Return Assistance Switzerland

Bern, January 2022

1. Aims of Return Assistance

Return assistance is aimed at facilitating the voluntary return of migrants to their country of origin and their reintegration. Assistance is devised for all asylum seekers and certain other categories of migrants (such as victims of human trafficking). Return assistance is provided to encourage assisted voluntary return. The return assistance includes the following instruments:

- return counseling services in the cantons
- return counseling in the federal asylum centres (FAC)
- individual return assistance
- country-specific return assistance programs
- structural aid and prevention of irregular migration (PiM)

Return assistance is governed by the Asylum Act (specifically Article 93) and by the Asylum Decree 2 on Financial Issues (specifically chapter 6). The State Secretariat for Migration (SEM) is competent for the implementation in Switzerland.

2. Return Counseling Services

Return Counseling Services (RCS) are responsible for passing on information on return assistance to the target groups and the offices concerned. Depending on the canton, these may be an administrative agency, such as a cantonal migration department, or a nongovernmental organization, such as the Red Cross or Caritas. In the FAC, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) or the RCS of the competent canton carry the responsibility for the RCS. Funding, activities, structural and counseling standards of the RCS are ruled by the directive 4.1 on return counseling.

The RCS are supposed to serve asylum seekers as a point of contact. Discussing problems and plans for the future directly with those concerned, the RCS both assist in preparing the return of migrants to their native countries and define the assistance necessary. IOM helps establish country-specific information, such as the costs for housing or the availability of medication. Accompanied return may be provided to vulnerable people willing to return to their native country. The RCS in charge submits requests for assistance to the SEM for approval, implementation, and coordination on location.

3. Individual Return Assistance

Individual return assistance is a service meant for all persons who have applied for asylum. Persons from states that are exempt from visa obligations are not entitled to return assistance. The assistance granted and the way in which it is allocated, are governed by directive 4.2 on individual return assistance. People willing to return to their native country benefit from the following services and benefits:

- return counseling and preparations
- all costs for return journey
- a cash allowance of maximal CHF 1,000 for adults (CHF 500 for minors)
- an individual return assistance up to CHF 3,000 for a social or professional reintegration project
- for departures from the cantons a project assistance up to CHF 5,000 for special reintegration needs (e.g. professional *and* housing needs, hardship cases or large families)
- individual medical return assistance: purchase of medicine or also payment for medical treatment received following return, and medical escort service

A traveling allowance of CHF 100 per adult is granted for covering traveling expenses. This allowance can be increased up to CHF 500 for a single person, and up to CHF 1,000 per family.

The IOM offices and the Swiss diplomatic missions are regularly involved in assisting returnees on location, paying out return money, doing project follow-up supervision or assessing social and medical settings, among other things. In countries with above-average emigration and/ or political importance, the SEM makes a basic contribution towards financing an IOM office to ensure the support of returnees. At present, this is the case in Afghanistan, Ethiopia, Gambia, Iraq, Somalia and Sri Lanka. Returnees from the following countries, who have submitted a project proposal, can attend a business training course.

In the FAC, the SEM offers the same return assistance with the exception of the increased project assistance. However, return assistance is granted according to the status of the asylum procedure, country specific reasons and the duration of stay of each individual. The SEM continuously reviews the declining structure and the target group and undertakes adjustments when needed.

4. Country-specific return assistance programs

The SEM, together with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the IOM, implement country-specific return assistance programs. These programs are specifically designed to fit the needs of the returnees, while taking into account the political and economical situation in their native country.

Return assistance programs were initially set up to help asylum seekers, fleeing the conflicts in Bosnia and Kosovo, return home. These programs made it possible for 10,000 people to resettle in Bosnia, and 40,000 in Kosovo.

The interdepartmental working group for international cooperation in the field of migration (IMZ-Structure) both decides on the implementation of return assistance programs and coordinates them. For return assistance program to be considered necessary, various criteria must be considered, such as the number of asylum applications, the political situation in the country of origin, the current situation regarding the enforcement of removal orders, and the willingness of the authorities in the native countries to cooperate with readmission.

Depending on the program proposed, the contents of assistance granted to individuals may vary. As a rule, however, substantive financial aid and a project for social and professional reintegration are part of the support package. In general, when arriving in their native country, returnees are assisted by a partner agency on location (returnee monitoring).

At present, the SEM provides no country-specific program with adapted benefits. However, depending on certain constellations (e.g. in a post-war situation similar to the initial Balkans programs), the SEM still considers launching a new country-specific program an interesting option to be explored.

5. Structural Aid and Prevention of Irregular Migration (PiM)

In addition to the assistance granted to individual returnees through return assistance, structural aid projects are funded in certain countries of origin. These projects are steered by the IMZ-Structure and implemented by the SDC and must contribute to improving infrastructural settings in the countries of origin and preventing further irregular migration. The funded projects should benefit the resident populations or the local administration. They may include the reconstruction of schools and medical facilities, or educational support and job development. These projects are intended to have a medium to long-term effect.

Under Article 93, Section 2 of the Asylum Act, the programmes abroad may also help prevent irregular migration to Switzerland by, for example, establishing return assistance programmes for stranded migrants in transit countries, or by conducting information and awareness campaigns in the countries of origin. Unlike the structural aid projects, these projects have a short-term effect.

6. Return Assistance - an outlook on the benefits

Conceived in the early 1990s, return assistance has constantly evolved in response to the changing situation in the field of asylum. Return assistance has since become an essential element of current Swiss asylum policy. Encouraging people to return to their native country voluntarily rather than under constraint is decidedly preferable for all actors involved. Besides, it is the only option if forced return cannot be carried out. Generally, offering return assistance and implementing country-specific measures results in a better acceptance from the foreign authorities to welcome their nationals. What is more, such efforts help foster dialog on migration. Most important, perhaps, is the example returnees set by profiting from the advantages of voluntary return assistance. Eventually, demonstrating their preparedness to return to their native country may well help induce the Swiss public opinion and certain pressure groups in Switzerland to take a more favorable stand on return and asylum issues.

7. More Information

During the Covid pandemic, about 70 persons return to their country of origin each month with individual return assistance.

<https://www.sem.admin.ch/sem/en/home/rueckkehr/rueckkehrhilfe.html>

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