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# EASO newsletter in 2016

Key COI related points

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January 2017

**Items of relevance to COI and the work of the Consultative Forum in  
2016 EASO newsletters**  
**- Compiled by ARC – [emphasis added]**

**January 2016**

EASO's Management Board elects new Chair and new Executive Director: On 21st and 22nd January 2016, the EASO Management Board gathered in Malta to discuss EASO work in the framework of the EU Migration agenda and to elect a new Chairman of the Management Board and a new Executive Director. During the meeting, Mag Wolfgang Taucher (AT) was elected as the Chairman of the Management Board while José Carreira (PT) was elected as EASO Executive Director.

EASO publishes a Country of Origin Information (COI) report on security situation in Afghanistan: The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) published a Country of Origin Information (COI) Report entitled '[Afghanistan - security situation](#)'. **The report is an update of a previous report published in February 2015 and provides a comprehensive overview of the security situation in Afghanistan, providing information relevant for Protection Status Determination of Afghan asylum seekers.** [...]

The EASO 'Afghanistan security situation' COI report provides a general description of the security situation in Afghanistan, covering the following topics: **a brief historical overview; actors in the conflict; security trends and armed confrontations, description of tactics and arms used; state ability to secure law and order; impact of the violence on security forces, civilian population and the political process. In addition, the report provides a description of the security situation for each of the 34 provinces and Kabul.** In these chapters, a general overview of the province is given, followed by information on the impact of violence in the province, data on violent incidents, and qualitative information on the type of violence. Finally, a brief overview of violence induced displacements is given, followed by a description of the armed actors in the province. The reference period for the security report runs from 1 November 2014 until 31 October 2015. [...]

Researchers from EASO, Austria, Belgium, France, Greece, Hungary and Slovak Republic participated in the joint drafting process of this country overview report. **It was written in accordance with the EASO COI Report Methodology and reviewed by other experts** (from Sweden, the UK and UNHCR) to ensure the highest quality. [...] This is the fourth COI report on Afghanistan published by EASO. In 2012, EASO published: "COI Report Afghanistan, Taliban Strategies: Recruitment" and "COI Report Afghanistan, Insurgent Strategies: Intimidation and targeted violence against Afghans"; in 2015, EASO published its first security situation report. **It is EASO's intention to continue to produce such reports on important countries of origin and to update them on a regular basis in order to raise and harmonise COI standards in the EU and to further support the practical implementation of the Common European Asylum System.**

EASO cooperation with Italian National Asylum Commission: In June 2013, EASO established a strong working relationship with NAC under the coordination of the Department for Civil Liberties and Immigration (DCLI) in Italian Ministry of Interior.

The National Asylum Commission (NAC) coordinates the tasks of the Territorial Commissions (TC) for the recognition of international protection in Italy, offering them specialised training and relevant information on socio-political and economic conditions in the countries of origin of applicants for international protection. In these specific fields, EASO and NAC have cooperated for enhanced capacity building over the past years. Some examples:

- EASO and NAC contributed to improve both quality and quantity in the processing of applications for international protection and **introduce COI knowledge before the interview.** An extended registration questionnaire and specific guidelines were developed.
- Vulnerability assessment: EASO and NAC supported the members of the TC in understanding the particularities of identifying and interviewing vulnerable persons.
- **Relevant COI checks: EASO and NAC supported the members of the TC to understand the crucial role of COI, key human rights issues and the general situation in relevant countries of origin.** One-to-one coaching on specific countries was conducted, as well as **a training session on the importance of COI and its use** (Incontro formativo commissione, presentazione "Importanza dell'informazione sui paesi di origine (COI)

e del suo utilizzo”). The presentation was based on a very comprehensive handout for the attendees. As assessed by the EASO expert team in May 2015, NAC COI Unit was reinforced by additional, wellqualified researchers. The quality of the answers to legal authorities, the motivation shown by all members of the new COI team to provide useful services and the support by NAC President are a solid basis for further development.

Last autumn, EASO and NAC created the unit’s name (‘Unità COI’) and a corporate identity (within the framework of MoI). A new standard template for responses and operational guides for the COI unit and TC was introduced, together with internal guidance for the COI unit on COI methodology and modus operandi, including a mechanism for quality assurance and a clearance process.

## February 2016

### EASO-Switzerland working arrangement enters into force

On 1 March 2016, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) welcomed ratification of the Agreement on the modalities of the participation of the Swiss Confederation in the work of EASO.

**The entry into force of the Agreement marks a strengthened cooperation between EASO and the Swiss Confederation and will allow Switzerland to participate in EASO’s work, receive support from EASO, and benefit from its valuable expertise on countries of origin information,** training and other tools offered by EASO. Moreover, Swiss national experts may be engaged by EASO, and deployed in EASO operations, including those in the hotspots in Italy and Greece. [...]

### EASO Workshops on Syria and Exclusion

Since the onset of the conflict in Syria, **EASO has organised a number of policy and COI workshops as well as a conference on Syria with the aim to follow-up on the situation in this country and to discuss/exchange on how EU+ countries are dealing and have dealt with the Syrian caseload.** Recently, and in particular since the attacks in Paris (November 2015) the fear of terrorists or war criminals using national asylum procedures to enter and reside in Europe is heightened. In order to safeguard the integrity of the international protection system, it is of utmost importance to filter out persons who do not deserve this protection, both in regular national asylum procedures and in the recently set up relocation exercise. The possible application of exclusion clauses in an asylum procedure requires not only a good legal knowledge from the asylum decision-maker, but also a good understanding of the situation in the country at hand, the crimes committed, and the actors involved.

**With this background in mind, EASO organised in parallel two workshops on exclusion with a particular focus on Syria. One workshop, organised by the Centre for Information, Documentation and Analysis (CIDA) focused on Country of Origin Information (COI) research on persons and organisations involved in excludable crimes in Syria.** The second workshop, organised by the Centre for Training, Quality and Expertise (CTQE), was dedicated to the decision-making practice in Member States and possible application of exclusion clauses to certain applicants from Syria. **Both workshops started with a common session that provided up to date and relevant information on the types of human rights violations and war crimes committed by all parties to the conflict and the actors of crimes (Syrian military and security forces, the armed opposition groups and the Islamic State).**

**Four independent journalists and experts from international research institutes were invited to share their knowledge on Syria.** These presentations fed into the next day’s discussions on the challenges involved in both COI research and asylum decision-making when confronted with Syrian potential exclusion cases.

### EASO launches new COI Portal Beta version

In February, the new COI Portal beta version was launched. **Now accessible to the public with the aim to increase COI transparency for all asylum practitioners, including civil society, this platform has been redesigned to provide attractive and up to-date interfaces and improved search capabilities.**

Re-focused as a specialist application, the EASO COI Portal deliver COI authored by national asylum administrations from EU Member States, Norway and Switzerland, EASO and EU institutions (EU External Action Service, European Parliament, etc.).

**This beta version allows users to search for COI from different sources, in different languages and to be regularly informed of COI publications or events. Additional features - such as country or topic specific alerts, country overview pages, and dedicated collaboration spaces for the EASO COI Specialists Networks -**

will be added progressively throughout the year 2016. For nonEnglish documents, more English abstracts will be provided in the future, allowing the users to identify relevant information.

## March 2016

EASO publishes a Country of Origin Information (COI) report on security situation in Somalia

**The European Asylum Support Office (EASO) published a Country of Origin Information (COI) Report entitled 'Somalia security situation'.** The report is an update of the security chapter of the EASO COI report on South and Central Somalia, published in August 2014, and has been extended to Somaliland, Puntland, and the disputed areas between these administrations (Sool, Sanaag, Khatumo). The report provides a **comprehensive overview of the security situation** in Somalia, information relevant for the protection status determination of Somali asylum seekers. Amongst other things, the report reveals that armed insurgent groups, in particular Al-Shabaab, have increasingly conducted large-scale and complex attacks in South and Central Somalia against the Somali National Army (SNA) and the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM). In 2015, Somalia ranked 9th in the top countries of origin in the EU+ countries (EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland), with a total number of almost 22,000 applicants. [...]

In 2015, Somalia ranked 9nd in the top countries of origin in the EU+ countries (EU Member States plus Norway and Switzerland), with a total number of almost 22,000 applicants. This report is the second COI report on Somalia published by EASO. In August 2014, EASO published its Country Overview report on South and Central Somalia. The EASO COI Report 'Somalia security situation' provides a general description of the security situation in Somalia, **covering the following topics: a brief historic overview; actors in the conflict (state's armed forces, international forces and armed groups); a brief description of the major attacks by Al-Shabaab and military operations by AMISOM and Somai National Armed Forces (SNAF); the impact of the violence on the state ability to secure law and order, with descriptions of the Judiciary, detention conditions and death penalty; the impact of the violence on the civilian population; and a geographical overview of the security situation.**

In the second part, **the report provides a description of the security situation in different regions** in Somalia, including the capital Mogadishu. In these chapters, a general overview of the region is given, followed by the major violent incidents. Information on the actors in the region and the areas of control or influence by each of these actors is described. Finally, a brief overview of the impact of the violence on the population is given, including displacements, transport and food security. The reference period for the security report runs from August 2014 until 31 December 2015.

Main Findings

**Information provided in the report shows a new trend in the Somali security situation in 2015. Al-Shabaab has conducted increasingly largescale and complex attacks on the AMISOM/SNAF forces and in some cases briefly took over control of military bases. At the same time, Al-Shabaab has lost control over an increasing number of towns in South and Central Somalia, although it remains active in the countryside around these towns.** Al-Shabaab has furthermore conducted large-scale attacks in neighbouring countries active in AMISOM, in particular Kenya, Uganda. **Although overall the number of attacks is decreasing, the report notices that Al-Shabaab continues to carry out frequent complex attacks within Mogadishu, typically employing a combination of vehicle borne improvised explosive devices followed by the deployment of suicide gunmen, often disguised in AMISOM uniforms.**

The report further notes that besides insurgency and counter-insurgency operations, **clan conflicts have an important impact on the security situation in Somalia as well a new development is the growing influence of the Islamic State (IS) to which a group of Al-Shabaab fighters in the Galgala mountains (Puntland) pledged allegiance.** Apart from this potential security threat, the main security issue in northern Somalia is the ongoing border conflict between Somaliland and Puntland and the newly formed Khatumo State (covering parts of Sool and Sanaag).

Researchers from The Netherlands, Slovak Republic and Sweden participated in the joint drafting process of this report. The report was written in accordance with the EASO COI Report Methodology. It was reviewed by experts from Belgium, Denmark, Finland, and a security information analyst from UN Department of Safety and Security (UNDSS), Somalia, in order to ensure the highest quality.

**It is EASO's intention to continue to produce such reports on important countries of origin and to update them on a regular basis in order to raise and harmonise COI standards in the EU and to further support the practical implementation of the Common European Asylum System.**

## April 2016

### EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Specialist Network Seminar of Iraq

On 26 - 27 April 2016, EASO hosted the **Iraq Country of Origin Information (COI) Specialist Network meeting** in Malta. Participants assessed the level of cooperation within the network, shared information needs and upcoming national COI products, and discussed future joint activities. **Two external speakers delivered presentations on topics the security situation (Baghdad and surrounding areas or Kurdish Region), access to protection, freedom of movement, targeted and vulnerable groups, as well as Internal Protection Alternatives in Iraq.**

### EASO Country of Origin Information (COI) Strategic Network meeting

The COI Strategic Network (StratNet), composed of heads of national COI units or persons otherwise responsible for COI in national administrations, met in Malta on 20-21 May. After an overview of EASO COI activities, held since the last StratNet meeting in October 2015, and a presentation on EASO COI support in the Hotspot context, **lengthy breakout discussions were held on the impact of the current asylum crisis on COI research both at national and EU level**, and on the possible ways forward in light of recent initiatives at EU-level, such as the Agenda on Migration, Council Conclusions on Asylum Decision Practices, and the new asylum package that will be launched in the upcoming months. **Discussions focused on how Member States and EASO can work more closely together** and how more efficiency can be achieved by improved planning and information-exchange, but also on the **question of integrity and independence of COI research** in a context where the distinction between COI research and policy development is not always well understood. On the second meeting day, EASO presented the functionalities of the new public COI Portal (<https://coi.easo.europa.eu/>) and presented planned upcoming developments. Finally, based on the **outcomes of online surveys launched among specific user groups, EASO presented a preliminary evaluation of the EASO COI Network approach and the EASO COI Reports. The reports were evaluated very positively by COI researchers, caseworkers and members of courts and tribunals.** Surveys on the five most recent EASO COI report remain available for all users (general public) on the EASO website (<https://easo.europa.eu/asylum-documentation/easo-publication-anddocumentation/>).

## May 2016

### Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Union Agency for Asylum and repealing Regulation (EU) No 439/2010

The most important aim of this proposal, launched on 4 May 2016, is to strengthen the role of EASO and develop it into an agency which facilitates the implementation and improves the functioning of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). Since taking up its responsibilities in 2011, EASO has continuously supported Member States to apply the current rules and to improve the functioning of existing tools. Reasons for and objectives of the proposal On 6 April 2016, the Commission adopted a Communication entitled "Towards a reform of the Common European Asylum System and enhancing legal avenues to Europe", in which it set out its priorities for improving the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). The Commission announced, in response to calls by the European Council, that it would progressively work towards reforming the existing Union framework by establishing a sustainable and fair system for determining the Member States responsible for asylum seekers, by reinforcing the EURODAC system, by achieving greater convergence in the asylum system thereby preventing secondary movements, and by developing an enhanced mandate for the European Asylum Support Office (EASO). This proposal is being presented as part of a first package of reform of the CEAS together with two other proposals, namely a proposal to reform the Dublin system and another proposal amending the EURODAC system. The Agency has gained experience and earned credibility for its work as regards practical cooperation among Member States and in supporting them to implement their obligations under the CEAS. In time, the tasks undertaken by EASO progressively evolved so as to meet the growing needs of Member States and of the CEAS as a whole. The Member States increasingly rely on the operational and technical support of the Agency. The Agency increased its knowledge and experience in the field of asylum and it is time to transform it into a centre of expertise in its own right and not one that still significantly relies on information and expertise provided by Member States. In the Commission's view, the Agency is one of the tools that can be used to effectively address the structural weaknesses in the CEAS which have been further

exacerbated by large scale and uncontrolled arrival of migrants and asylum seekers to the European Union particularly during the past year. It would not be plausible to reform the CEAS without providing the Agency with a mandate that corresponds to the demands that the reform will entail. It is essential to equip the Agency with the means necessary to assist Member States in crisis situations, but it is all the more necessary to build a solid legal, operational and practical framework for the Agency to be able to reinforce and complement the asylum and reception systems of Member States. To reflect this development, the proposal renames EASO as the European Union Agency for Asylum. **An enhanced mandate, as set out in this proposal transforms EASO into a fully-fledged Agency which is capable of providing the necessary operational and technical assistance to Member States, increasing practical cooperation and information exchange among Member States, supporting a sustainable and fair distribution of applications for international protection, monitoring and assessing the implementation of the CEAS and the capacity of asylum and reception systems in Member States, and enabling convergence in the assessment of applications for international protection across the Union.**

Quick Link The official proposal for a REGULATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL on the European Union Agency for Asylum and repealing Regulation (EU) No 439/2010:

[http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160504/easo\\_proposal\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/policies/european-agenda-migration/proposal-implementation-package/docs/20160504/easo_proposal_en.pdf)

#### Eritrea COI Specialist Network Meeting in Malta

On 11-12 May 2016 EASO hosted the **Eritrea COI specialist Network** meeting in Malta. **Participants assessed the level of cooperation within the network, shared information needs and upcoming national COI products, and discussed future joint activities.**

**Three external speakers delivered presentations on topics such as the National Service, the Secret Service, freedom of movement and press, prison conditions, religious freedom, situation of Eritreans in the diaspora, and vulnerable groups.**

#### EASO continues to expand activities for members of courts and tribunals

It has been a busy few weeks for the EASO support of members of courts and tribunals. At the end of April, EASO was represented at a meeting of the judges of the Administrative Courts of Saxony-Anhalt in Germany. The participants to this meeting were interested to learn more about EASO's activities for members of courts and tribunals as well as gaining a better understanding of current challenges in the European asylum crisis, including relocation and the EU-Turkey Agreement. **On 4 April 2016, EASO hosted a group of over 30 judges and judicial assistants from the Austrian Supreme Court. This visit was part of a study visit to Malta and EASO was pleased to be able to contextualise the current migratory situation in Europe as well as provide information on country-of-origin information of relevance to the group. Country-of-origin information was also the centre of a professional development workshop held on 11 and 12 May 2016 at the premises of the Higher Administrative Court of Lower Saxony in Brunswick, Germany. Over 2 days, 23 participants were provided with a deep understanding of country-of-origin information. A particular focus of the workshop was on techniques related to researching and evaluating sources of COI. The workshop took a practical approach and each participant was actively involved in carrying out research using a range of relevant methodologies.** On 18 May 2016, EASO also organised a pilot professional development workshop on exclusion. The meeting was attended by 16 members of courts and tribunals from 11 EU+ countries. Following the publication of the Judicial Analysis on exclusion, EASO is working towards the publication of an accompanying Judicial Trainer's Guidance Note on this subject. This will contain relevant materials suitable for the organisation of a workshop such as case studies, discussion questions and a moot court exercise. The workshop provided participants with an opportunity to engage in high-level discussion with colleagues and senior judicial experts. This workshop was organised on the fringes of the IARLJ-Europe Chapter Conference, at which EASO was also invited to play a role by presenting a keynote speech and participating in two panels on the current situation in Greece and the role of judges in a potentially more centralised EU asylum system. The conference was opened by His Royal Highness, Crown Prince Haakon of Norway and brought together a large number of judges from across the EU and beyond as well as others from academia and relevant international organisations.

## July/August 2016

### EASO has released the Annual Report on the Situation of Asylum in the EU in 2016 and the latest asylum figures for 2016

In 2015, almost 1.4 million applications for international protection were made in the EU+ - the highest number since the beginning of EU-level data collection in 2008.

The highest numbers of asylum applicants recorded were citizens of Syria, the Western Balkan countries combined, and Afghanistan. The main receiving countries were Germany, Hungary, Sweden, Austria and Italy. At the end of 2015, the number of persons awaiting a decision on their application for international protection passed the one million mark as the volume of pending applications more than doubled compared to the previous year.

The report aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the situation of asylum in the EU+ by examining requests for international protection to the EU, analysing application and decision data, and focusing on some of the most important countries of origin of applicants for international protection.

### EASO publishes a Country of Origin Information (COI) report on the security situation in Pakistan

The European Asylum Support Office published on 27 July 2016 a Country of Origin Information (COI) Report entitled 'Pakistan security situation'. **The report is an update of the security chapter of the EASO COI report on Pakistan, Country Overview, published in August 2015 and provides information relevant for the protection status determination of Pakistani asylum seekers.**

In 2015, Pakistan ranked 5th in the top countries of origin in the EU+ countries, with a total number of almost 48,000 applicants. Throughout 2016, the country maintained this ranking in the top countries of origin.

**The EASO COI Report 'Pakistan security situation' provides a general description of the security situation in Pakistan, covering the following topics: a brief background on the conflict in the country; actors in the conflict; an overview of recent security trends; the impact of the violence on the state ability to secure law and order; the impact of the violence on the civilian population; and a geographical overview of the security situation.**

**The second part of the report provides a more detailed description of the security situation in different regions in Pakistan.** In each regional chapter, a short description of the region is given, followed by a description of the security trends, the actors in the region and the impact of the violence on the population.

The report was drafted by a specialized researcher from the Belgian Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless Persons (Cedoca, Centre for Documentation and Research) in accordance with the EASO COI Report Methodology.

It was also reviewed by experts from Austria, Hungary, EASO and UNHCR, in order to ensure the highest quality.

It is EASO's intention to continue to produce such reports on important countries of origin and to update them on a regular basis in order to raise and harmonise COI standards in the EU and to further support the practical implementation of the Common European Asylum System.

## September

### EASO publishes a Country of Origin Information (COI) report on recruitment by armed groups in Afghanistan

The report is an update of a previous report published in 2012 and provides an overview of recruitment practices of armed groups in Afghanistan, providing information relevant for protection status determination of Afghan asylum applicants. In the first seven months of 2016, Afghanistan ranked 2nd in the top countries of origin in EU+ countries[1], with a total of almost 110 239 applicants.

**The EASO COI report on recruitment by armed groups in Afghanistan provides a description of the recruitment practices in Afghanistan, by the insurgent factions of the Afghan Taliban, the Islamic State in Khorasan (IS) and the Hezb-e Islami group led by Gulbuddin Hekmatyar. The report also looks into recruitment by the Afghan Local Police (ALP) and pro-government militias (PGM). In a last chapter, information is presented on the specific issue of under-age or child recruitment.** This is a topic of particular concern since a high percentage of the Afghan asylum applicants in Europe concerns Unaccompanied Minors. Depending on the EU+ country, this percentage varies from 0 to 54 % and on average it is over 14 %.

The report was co-drafted by EASO and Cedoca, the COI unit of the Belgian Office of the Commissioner General for Refugees and Stateless persons. The report was written in accordance with the EASO COI Report Methodology and presents information until 19 August 2016, stemming from publicly available sources and a

series of interviews conducted with experts on the matter, named in the report. The report was reviewed by peers from EU Member States, by UNHCR, and by an expert from the Afghanistan Analysts Network.

The report describes the transition of the Taliban into a more conventional armed force since the withdrawal of foreign troops, as well as the establishment of a new Taliban mobile elite force, called qet'a. Furthermore, opinions of experts are presented on the traditional role of the tribe or family in the recruitment process. The Taliban are still an overwhelmingly Pashtun movement, but some episodes of Hazaras joining the Taliban's ranks have been noted. The report covers the important topic of 'forced recruitment' by Taliban and IS, both insurgent groups but with a different ideology.

Regarding recruitment by ALP and PGM, the report highlights the formal role of the local community council (shura) or local strongmen, but also problems related to this. Of particular concern is the recruitment of minors or children by all parties in the conflict. The report discusses the economic incentives, the role of schools or madrassas, the mechanisms to prevent underage recruitment in the Afghan National security forces, including age-verifications procedures, and how these mechanisms can fail.

## October

No updates specific to COI

## November

### EASO Consultative Forum in Athens attracted over 200 members of Civil Society Organisations and individuals

On 28-29 November 2016, the European Asylum Support Office (EASO) held its sixth Consultative Forum plenary meeting. The aim of the event, which is organised annually, was to discuss ideas and experience from Civil Society, relevant to EASO's work, in particular, the hotspots. For the first time, this meeting was held in Athens, Greece, in order to facilitate the participation of actors operating in the field of asylum and reception in Greece. New was also the adoption of a fully participatory format, which aimed to result in an authentic dialogue, and offered the participants the opportunity to proactively engage, contribute to the agenda setting, and share ideas.

The meeting was opened by the European Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs and Citizenship, Dimitris Avramopoulos. Some of Europe's most notable and active actors in the field of asylum addressed the forum, including EASO Executive Director Jose Carreira, UNHCR Director of the Bureau for Europe Vincent Cochetel, the Director of the Greek Asylum Service Maria Stavropoulou, and ECRE Secretary General Catherine Wollard.

### EASO PUBLISHES COUNTRY OF ORIGIN INFORMATION REPORTS ON WESTERN BALKAN COUNTRIES AND TURKEY

EASO published Country of Origin Information (COI) Reports on Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Turkey. **These reports, drafted upon request of the European Parliament and the Council, provide factual information on selected topics relevant for safe country designation, more specifically in the framework of the proposal for an EU List of Safe Countries of Origin.**

On 9 September 2015, the European Commission adopted a proposal for a regulation establishing a European List of safe countries of origin (COM(2015) 452 final), which would include all Western Balkan countries and Turkey. Negotiations on this proposal are still ongoing. On 26 February 2016, EASO received a request from the European Parliament for a contribution on Turkey, which was followed, on 1 April 2016, by a similar request from the Council on Turkey and all Western Balkan countries. In response to these information requests, EASO has drafted COI reports on all seven countries proposed to be included in the EU List of Safe Countries of Origin. [...]

All seven reports were co-drafted and reviewed by EASO and researchers from a number of national asylum authorities represented in EASO's COI Network (contributions as drafters or reviewers from Finland, Lithuania, Romania, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, France, Hungary), in accordance with the EASO COI Report Methodology and EASO Mandate. In line with this methodology, country information from a wide variety of sources is provided, while refraining from making any assessments or policy conclusions. Thus, the reports aim to support the ongoing negotiations on the EU List of Safe Countries of Origin by offering a factual knowledge base for more informed policy discussions.

For the designation of safe countries of origin, Annex I of the Asylum Procedures Directive foresees that: 'A country is considered as a safe country of origin where, on the basis of the legal situation, the application of the law within a democratic system and the general political circumstances, it can be shown that there is



generally and consistently no persecution as defined in Article 9 of Directive 2011/95/EU, no torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment and no threat by reason of indiscriminate violence in situations of international or internal armed conflict'. In addition, 'account shall be taken, inter alia, of the extent to which protection is provided against persecution or mistreatment'.

**The Country Focus reports at hand cover the most important topics related to the above-mentioned criteria for safe country of origin designation, namely: state structure (Constitution, Executive branch, Legislative Branch, Administration), socio-political landscape (Political parties, Elections, Civil society, Media), rule of law and state protection (Law enforcement, Judiciary), security situation and human rights situation (Legal context, Freedom of expression/religion/assembly, Detention, Situation of specific groups – ethnic or religious minorities, journalists, human rights activists, women, children, LGBTI persons, victims of trafficking, returnees).**

Based on feedback received from the institutional actors on the usability of this country information for the purpose of safe country designation, EASO intends to review the terms of reference of these COI reports, as needed, and plans to provide regular updates, taking into account the time-sensitive nature of the information in question.

#### WORKSHOP ON FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

On 25 and 26 October 2016, a workshop on Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting (FGM/C) and Country of Origin Information (COI) was held on behalf of COI researchers from EU+ countries.

Five external experts were invited to provide information on the prevalence of FGM/C, differentiated to region, age, social status, the cultural context and decision-making process, and the possibilities of protection and prevention by the state.

Prof. Bettina Shell-Duncan presented her research on Senegal and The Gambia, Prof. Ellen Gruenbaum on Sudan, Prof. Omar Abdelcadir on Somalia, Cody Donahue (UNICEF) on Sudan, and Idah Nabateregga (Terres des Femmes) on Burkina Faso and Sierra Leone. In addition, Norway and Denmark gave presentations on their recent fact-finding missions to Nigeria, resp. Somalia. There were 28 participants from nearly all Member states and several NGOs who actively participated in the discussions. The workshop was very positively evaluated by participants.

#### NEW WORKING GROUP TO DEVELOP JUDICIAL GUIDANCE ON COUNTRY OF ORIGIN INFORMATION (COI)

EASO will shortly be launching a call for expressions of interest from judicial experts in the area of COI. This publication will take the form of a judicial practical guidance and will focus on issues related to researching and obtaining COI as well as assessing the reliability of sources. The guide will rely on traditional and state of the art methods and will also draw on EASO's considerable experience in the area of COI. Once the members of the Working Group have been identified, work is due to commence in April 2017.

### December

#### RECENT PUBLICATIONS- AFGHANISTAN SECURITY SITUATION

EASO published a Country of Origin Information (COI) Report entitled 'Afghanistan security situation'. The report is an update of the first version published in February 2015 and provides a comprehensive overview of the security situation in Afghanistan, information relevant for the protection status determination of Afghan asylum seekers. Until the end of September 2016, Afghanistan ranked 2nd in the top countries of origin in EU+ countries ( ), with more than 150,000 applicants. In addition, the Afghan applications constitute the largest backlog of all countries of origin. By the end of August 2016, there were more than 225,000 pending asylum applications from Afghan nationals in the EU+.

This COI report represents a second update on the security situation in Afghanistan ( ). The report was co-drafted by researchers from the national asylum authorities of Austria, Belgium, France, Hungary and Poland in accordance with the EASO COI Report Methodology. Researchers from Greece and Slovakia did supportive research and the report was reviewed and commented upon by COI researchers from Austria, Canada, EASO, Finland, Ireland and UNHCR. The reference period for the security report runs from 1 September 2015 until 31 August 2016.

The report can be downloaded following the link: <https://coi.easo.europa.eu/administration/easo/PLib/Afghanistan%20security%20report.pdf>

#### REPORT ON ERITREA - NATIONAL SERVICE AND ILLEGAL EXIT

Report on 'Eritrea – National service and illegal exit'. The report is an update of the 2015 EASO COI Report Eritrea Country Focus.

It provides an overview on aspects related to national service and illegal exit in Eritrea relevant to international protection status determination of Eritrean applicants. In the first ten months of 2016, Eritrea ranked 7<sup>th</sup> in the top countries of origin in EU+ countries ( ), with a total of 31 416 applicants.

Draft evasion, desertion and illegal exit represent major asylum motives for Eritrean applicants for international protection. The report provides a description of the legal context and practices of national service (covering both the military and civilian branch), including the treatment by the Eritrean authorities of draft evaders and deserters. The report also looks into the legal position and treatment in practice of Eritreans who return to their country after having left it illegally, without an exit visa.

The EASO COI report was drafted by the COI unit of the Swiss State Secretariat for Migration (SEM). The report was written in accordance with the EASO COI Report Methodology and presents information until 10 August 2016, stemming from publicly available sources and interviews conducted with experts. The report was reviewed by peers from EU Member States.

The report can be downloaded following the link: [https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/COI-%20Eritrea-Dec2016\\_LR.pdf](https://www.easo.europa.eu/sites/default/files/publications/COI-%20Eritrea-Dec2016_LR.pdf)

### EASO COI CONFERENCE ON ONLINE RESEARCH

On 23 and 24 November 2016, EASO organised a conference on COI online research tools, strategies and techniques. During the event, expert trainers gave hands-on workshops in which the latest developments in online applications, such as Facebook, Google, and the Internet Archive, were discussed and tried.

Since there was a wide interest among EU+ countries( ) to get indepth training on online research related to the topics of security and potential exclusion profiles, the workshops included research on profiles with a link to armed groups, terrorist organisations, or to events that potentially qualify as war crimes, crimes against humanity or other severe crimes.

52 Participants took part in the conference and the feedback on the workshops has been considered to be very good.

### EASO COI SPECIALIST NETWORKS

On 22 and 23 November 2016, the kick-off meeting of a new COI specialist network on West Africa took place. 14 COI researchers from EU+ countries( ) participated in the workshop, which was aimed at enhancing the knowledge, sharing information and informing each other of planned COI activities on West African countries.

Three external experts were invited to provide information on several themes. Prof. Leonardo de Villalon gave information on the radicalisation of Islam in relation to the security situation, Prof. Elizabeth Donnelly (Chatham House) gave insight in the organisation and actions of Boko Haram and in the security situation in Nigeria, and Amandine Bollinger, UNICEF West Africa, presented information on the phenomenon of early/child marriages in several countries. In addition, Norway and France gave presentations on their recent reports and fact-finding missions to Mali, resp. Nigeria. There was ample time for discussions and exchange of experiences and knowledge. The workshop was very positively evaluated by participants.