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Austria: rights of asylum-seekers, women and the disabled should be strengthened

Strasbourg, 07/06/2012 – “Living conditions of asylum-seekers in Austria are good in general. However, improvements should be considered to ensure that quality legal counseling is available at all stages of the asylum procedure and to broaden asylum seeker’s access to work” said Nils Muižnieks, Council of Europe Commissioner for Human Rights, after concluding his three-day visit to Austria.

The Commissioner met with asylum seekers, including unaccompanied children, families and single mothers, in the Federal Reception Centre East at Traiskirchen. He noted that basic needs are satisfied and welcomed that the authorities are considering giving young asylum seekers access to vocational training and apprenticeships.

Commissioner Muižnieks also focused on the protection of women’s rights. He welcomed Austria’s progress towards ratification of the Istanbul Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence, which is foreseen for the autumn. He also stressed the need for recent measures adopted with a view to promoting gender equality and closing the gender pay gap to be vigorously implemented and closely evaluated.

As concerns persons with disabilities, the Commissioner urged the Austrian authorities to ensure that the National Action Plan for persons with disabilities which is currently being drafted guarantees the full implementation of the UN Convention for the Rights of Persons with Disabilities across the country. “Ensuring access to buildings and enhancing the participation of persons with disability in the decision making process should be a matter of priority”. The Commissioner also spoke with elderly patients and staff at the interdisciplinary Socio-Medical Centre Baumgartner Höhe Otto-Wagner-Hospital and Care Centre, where he observed a visible commitment to providing high-standard services in particular in the field of geriatric medicine.

Lastly, the Commissioner welcomed the strengthening of the Austrian Ombudsman Board by integrating the National Human Rights Advisory Board as an important step towards a more coherent human rights protection system in Austria. “It is particularly noteworthy that this reform is supported by substantial resources to fulfill the new tasks in acting as an independent mechanism for the prevention of torture, thus ensuring domestic scrutiny of all places of detention. Further reflection is now needed on the strengthening of the legal and institutional framework against discrimination, including how equality bodies could be better integrated into the current human rights protection system and made more effective”.

The Commissioner’s report on his visit to Austria is forthcoming.

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Nils Muižnieks, took up his function on 1 April 2012