

## Country of Origin Information Unit

The Federal Asylum Office received a mandate to maintain and update information on various countries of origin with the entry into force of the Austrian Asylum Act of 2005 on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2006. According to this law all relevant facts concerning the situation in the countries of origin of asylum seekers are being recorded - with special emphasis on their significance for current asylum procedures - in order to improve the quality of asylum procedures in Austria.

Especially throughout the procedure of checking the credibility of asylum-seekers during hearings, knowledge about the situation in their country of origin is of considerable - if not crucial - importance. In many cases, the reasons for persecution indicated by asylum seekers that are relevant for the granting of asylum can be thoroughly checked for credibility on the basis of available information.

### Tasks of the COI-Unit

According to its statutory mandate, the Country of Origin Information Unit in the Federal Asylum Office is charged with the recording of all facts about the situation in countries of origin that are relevant for asylum procedures including the sources. This task comprises the collection of relevant facts:

1. for determining whether it can be concluded that the asylum-seeker is in danger of persecution in a certain state,
2. for assessing the credibility of claims made by asylum-seekers and

3. for determining whether a certain country can be categorised as a safe country of origin or a safe third country according to the Austrian Asylum Act.

Furthermore, the recording of facts requires an in-depth scientific analysis of the information collected. This includes drawing up general country assessments and topic-related assessments that can serve as a basis for decisions; drafting scientific essays on relevant subjects complying with scientific standards; research and response to case-related queries of decision makers of authorities in the field of asylum and other activities.

International cooperation, the implementation of fact-finding missions, support to the advisory council, further improvements of the user-friendliness of the data base and continuous evaluation measures complement the range of services provided by the Country of Origin Information Unit.

### Advisory Council

To assure comprehensive improvement on the country documentation, an advisory council has been established. It supports the Federal Asylum Office in updating and maintaining its country documentation records and other related activities.

Firstly, the advisory council has to advise the director of the Federal Asylum Office on the management of the country documentation and the activities associated with it, such as for example the gathering of relevant facts and the assessment of sources of information, as well as on conducting analyses.

Secondly, the advisory council recommends officially the implementation of certain measures [Standards, Fact Finding Missions, Cooperations...]. It consists of renowned experts from the fields of refugee matters, migration and international relations.

### Standards

The advisory council has conceived standards for query responses, country-assessments and scientific essays on country-specific subjects. All documents produced by the COI-Unit are based on these standards. They exactly define formal as well as contentual criteria, to guarantee the high standard of quality of the diversified range of products of the COI-Unit.

### The Database

Collected facts as well as detailed reports are documented and stored in an internal database. On this platform of the Federal Asylum Office all available documents are filed, grouped by countries of origin and sources. In addition a public database was set up on 1 January 2006, which can be accessed online via [www.staatendokumentation.at](http://www.staatendokumentation.at).

The database of the Federal Asylum Office is maintained and updated daily in close cooperation with the Red Cross/ACCORD. Special emphasis is placed on user-friendliness, in order to assure rapid access to the desired information. Accordingly all available documents are neatly arranged in the database. The relevant text passages can, by means of a search function, be readily found and accessed.

Since spring 2009 a revised version of the database is available, including a redesigned and immensely improved search function and an English-German thesaurus.

### International Cooperation

The Austrian COI-Unit endeavours in particular to establish international contacts in order to respond to the growing need for co-operation in the area of documentation of countries of origin at the European level. This is of utmost importance since it is often extremely difficult to obtain up-to-date and neutral reports on specific countries and regions of origin.

International cooperation can be particularly valuable in order to close gaps in documentation, particularly considering the well-known fact that individual Member States have acquired special expertise on situations prevailing in certain countries of origin, to which other Member States have only limited or no access. Important initial steps have been taken in order to expedite the internationalisation of documentation of countries of origin.

### Access Authorization

If you are not already authorised to use the country documentation free of charge in accordance with Section 60, para. 6 of the Austrian Asylum Act of 2005 and you are interested in obtaining access to the data base, please contact the COI-Unit of the Federal Asylum Office by telephone or by e-mail, or refer to the Website [www.staatendokumentation.at](http://www.staatendokumentation.at).

The right of access can be obtained for a six month period by payment of an administrative fee. The staff of the Country of Origin Information Unit will gladly provide you with further information at any time.

### Contact

For further details concerning the Country of Origin Information Unit of the Federal Asylum Office, please contact:

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