



Northern South America

Major developments

As the Colombian conflict continued, a steady flow of Colombians sought protection in the surrounding countries. At the end of 2005, there were some 500,000 Colombians in the neighbouring countries who had fled the escalating violence, but who preferred not to come forward and officially seek protection for fear of deportation or discrimination, or because they were not aware of asylum procedures. At 31 December 2005, there were some 34,000 refugees and asylum-seekers registered in the region.

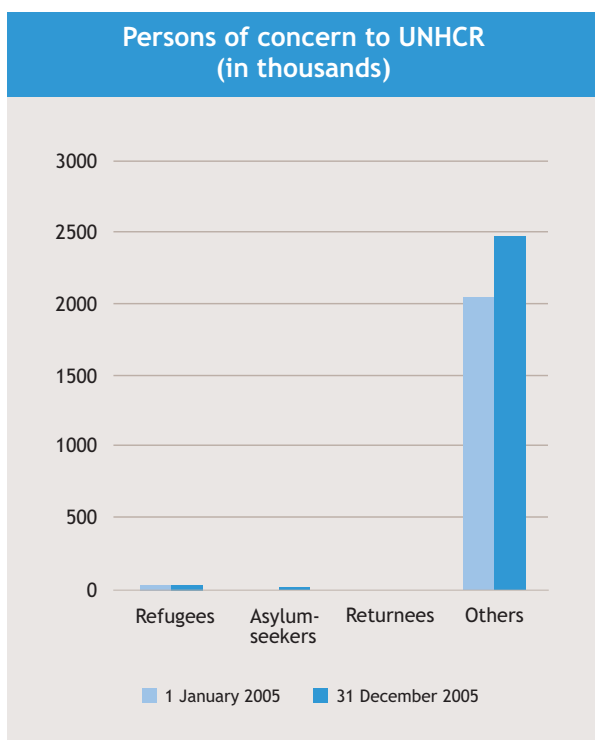
Challenges and concerns

Security remained the main concern when providing protection and assistance in the border areas. This was particularly true in Ecuador and Venezuela, where the presence of various Colombian armed groups was reported to have increased. Violence, kidnappings and killings increased along the borders, making staff security a serious and persistent concern. The Colombian conflict also had a negative effect on public opinion in the region, and xenophobia was on the rise. Further challenges for UNHCR in the region were inaccurate official migration statistics and a high degree of dispersion and mobility of persons of concern.

Progress towards solutions

During the first year of implementation of the Mexico Plan of Action, UNHCR's strategy was well aligned with the three strands of the Plan, known as "Borders of Solidarity", "Cities of Solidarity" and "Resettlement in Solidarity". Given the prevailing conditions in Colombia, which did not allow for voluntary repatriation (only three cases of voluntary repatriations were reported by UNHCR offices in the region in 2005), UNHCR concentrated on finding solutions through local integration and resettlement.

Colombia
Costa Rica
Ecuador
Guyana
Panama
Peru
Suriname
Venezuela



The Resettlement Units in Costa Rica and Ecuador referred 955 refugees to an increasing number of resettlement countries. As a welcome development, 294 of these were resettled in the emerging resettlement countries of Brazil, Chile and Argentina. For coordination purposes, UNHCR facilitated selection missions from these new resettlement countries. Also in Venezuela, UNHCR referred 37 refugees for resettlement.

The community support and integration programmes in border areas helped UNHCR to increase its protection

presence through access to remote and underdeveloped border communities, by strengthening the relationship between host communities and refugees, and by creating opportunities for UNHCR and its partners to promote the principles of refugee protection through capacity building and community organization. The self-reliance of urban refugees was fostered through job placements, vocational training and the use of microcredit.

Operations

In **Costa Rica**, a new migration law was approved in October. While not all of UNHCR's concerns were reflected in it, key refugee protection issues were covered such as *non-refoulement* and the validity of refugee identity cards as legal documents for residence and as work permits. The population of concern to UNHCR in Costa Rica was estimated to consist of more than 11,400 refugees and some 200 asylum-seekers (official statistics were not available at the time of writing). Some 85 per cent of them were Colombians, which means that the country became the second largest host for Colombian refugees in Latin America. The refugees here differed from their counterparts elsewhere in the region insofar as most were from urban backgrounds and had a higher level of education.

In Costa Rica, local integration efforts lay at the heart of UNHCR's programme. The streamlining of existing initiatives, such as the microcredit programme and job placement, was coupled with pilot projects and advocacy within a self-reliance strategy. The number of loans for small refugee businesses was increased; delayed or

defaulted repayments decreased; and the average credit processing time was reduced from one month to one week. A study of the socio-economic impact of the microcredit programme revealed clear improvements in the living conditions of refugees. Key gains were also made in job placement via renewed cooperation with the Ministry of Labour, leading to employment for 84 refugees, twice as many as in the previous year. At the same time, 52 refugees and 180 national labour inspectors were trained on refugee labour rights. In the context of renewed cooperation with the University of Costa Rica, students from various faculties completed their community service by working alongside government and non-government partners, in the Ministry of Labour, the Directorate General for Migration, and UNHCR's local NGO partner. As a result of this cooperation, an evaluation of the governmental Refugee Department was undertaken and the 30-day time frame for refugee status determination maintained. Further results included a manual for refugees on documentation, increased efficiency of the local NGO, and three workshops aimed principally at enabling refugees to understand their rights and responsibilities and argue their case more effectively. The Office in Costa Rica also hosted a workshop on age, gender and diversity mainstreaming for UNHCR, NGO partners and government staff in Mexico, Central America and Panama. It then undertook an extensive participatory assessment, which provided valuable information for the Office's strategy for 2006.

Ecuador received close to 7,100 new asylum-seekers during the year and became the country with the highest number of refugees in Latin America. In addition, there were approximately 250,000 other persons of concern who fled from neighbouring Colombia. Over the past five years, over 38,600 people (mainly Colombians) have filed asylum requests in the country, and some 11,500 have been recognized as refugees. The National Eligibility Commission met 53 times during the year. The recognition rate rose to 47.8 per cent, reflecting a considerable increase compared to previous years, due to the improved assessment capacities of the eligibility officers. To ensure better refugee protection through an extended outreach to areas with high numbers of registered and non-registered persons in need of protection, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and UNHCR made the necessary arrangements to transfer the registration and documentation procedures to the new Foreign Ministry's Refugee Office in Cuenca as of 2006. This will facilitate access to the asylum system for individuals, especially those located in the south of the country. Coordination among the UN agencies which participate in the Northern Border Inter-Agency Thematic Group was reinforced by mapping all the projects in that area in order to facilitate joint programming. Regular contact with the Foreign

Ministry served to create and support links with domestic initiatives.

Humanitarian assistance for new arrivals and refugees with specific needs was provided in collaboration with NGOs and WFP. Thanks to the latter, over 21,500 food packages were distributed. UNHCR provided support for rent and household items and medical assistance, including counselling and education. The purchase of non-food items became more cost-effective as WFP agreed to undertake local purchasing on behalf of UNHCR.

The operation in Ecuador placed great emphasis on self-reliance and local integration — not a straightforward undertaking in a country from which considerable numbers of nationals migrate for economic reasons. A legal advisor, financed by UNHCR, was hired for the Foreign Ministry's Refugee Office to coordinate policies with other ministries and identify practical and legal obstacles to integration. In Quito, the first Information and Advice Centre was inaugurated. It provides legal assistance and helps asylum-seekers and refugees to gain access to public services and employment opportunities. During the months following its opening in June, more than 800 people sought advice at the Centre. The Community Support and Integration Programme allowed for more active community participation and greater involvement on the part of local authorities. In 2005, 29 such programmes were implemented and benefited more than 20,000 people in areas with large concentrations of people in need of international protection (only some of whom were registered). Other self-reliance activities included vocational training, child-care and community credit banks, and were administered with careful attention to considerations of gender and age.

In **Panama**, a national debate started on a possible revision of the refugee legislation. Meanwhile, however, there was no progress worthy of note regarding the predicament of over 400 long-term urban refugees and 900 Colombians with temporary humanitarian protection status at the border with Colombia. At the end of the year, the total number of refugees, asylum-seekers and others of concern stood at over 12,400.

Operations concentrated on a shift from humanitarian assistance to self-reliance activities in Darién Province, Kuna Yala region, and in the urban centres, particularly Panama City. Food distributions were discontinued by mid-year in Darién Province and a rather expensive medical evacuation programme, under which people with medical problems were brought from border areas to the capital for treatment, was reduced. At the same time, UNHCR and its NGO partners intensified efforts to find sustainable and community-based solutions. For instance, the three community credit schemes were



Panama: Colombian refugees produce bricks from sugar cane as part of a UNHCR-funded microcredit project. The cane bricks, commonly used for building in this area, are sold at the market. The project is overseen by a partner agency and run by a community of refugees. *UNHCR / B. Heger*

strengthened to support more than 100 projects through loans. By the end of the year, these had 176 members, 42 per cent of them women. In the capital, the new microcredit programme started with 12 credits for small-scale businesses and will be expanded in 2006. Hygiene and basic infrastructure were improved through six projects in primary and secondary schools in Darién Province, including the opening of a community library. Also in Darién Province, construction material was provided to 40 families who until then had been receiving rental subsidies, to enable them to build their own houses. The municipality contributed by donating the plots of land. The participation of other national entities, notably in the health sector, remained very limited. The age, gender and diversity mainstreaming strategy was launched towards the end of the year, and group discussions were held with urban refugees and those under temporary humanitarian protection at the border. One positive result was the implementation of projects in detention centres at the borders with Costa Rica and Colombia to address sexual and gender-based violence. These projects improved the living conditions of female detainees and their children and permitted UNHCR better access to the centres and to potential asylum-seekers.

In **Venezuela**, UNHCR and the Government estimated that there were 200,000 persons of concern, residing primarily along the border. The National Refugee Commission continued to consolidate its presence in border areas with the opening of a third Regional Technical Secretariat in Zulia. The workings of the Commission showed improvements, but there was still a significant backlog of refugee

status determination cases (estimated at 6,000). UNHCR remained concerned about slow registration, erratic issuance of documentation and delays in refugee status determination (beyond the 90-day period provided for in Venezuelan refugee law).

As part of the protection response of the “Borders of Solidarity” component of the Mexico Plan of Action, the Community Support and Integration Programme continued to play a key role in the local integration of refugees, asylum-seekers and other persons of concern. These community-based projects also served as a launching pad for UNHCR and its partners to promote refugee rights, while at the same time mitigating potential tensions with the local host communities. During the year, 43 such programmes were implemented in the three border states of Zulia, Táchira and Apure for the benefit of more than 15,500 Colombians and nationals in host communities. Furthermore, a microcredit scheme was started in cooperation with a specialized, Táchira-based agency, providing 57 loans to small businesses. UNHCR also provided humanitarian assistance to people with specific needs, involving a subsistence allowance, food, medical assistance, hygiene items, household support kits and education grants. The assistance was provided for three to six months by NGOs, adhering to fixed criteria. A specialized agency also began to offer psychosocial care to asylum-seekers and refugees as high levels of depression were identified among the population due to the trauma of displacement. A project to address sexual and gender-based violence and reproductive health was carried out in Táchira following a joint initiative by UN agencies, led by UNHCR, which focuses on the

situation at the Colombian-Venezuelan border. The project sought to strengthen the inter-institutional protection network on gender issues and was carried out by five UN agencies and a number of national authorities. In cooperation with UNDP, a peace-building project was implemented with the objective of ensuring that local civil society and state actors respect the rights of refugees and asylum-seekers. In view of its success to date, the project will continue to receive funding from a local embassy for an additional year.

As part of a locally funded project, the Regional Office in Venezuela produced a series of radio dramatizations of the lives of refugees in three languages: Spanish, Wayunaikii and Bari. These “soap operas” were aired on local radio in areas where indigenous groups live, as well as in urban centres along the border. The project sought to reduce the level of discrimination against refugees, facilitate their integration into the receiving communities and educate refugees about their rights and responsibilities. Another public information activity in Venezuela was the consolidation of the Border Journalists Network, which brings together 65 reporters who cover refugee and human rights issues along the Colombian-Venezuelan border.

In **Peru**, covered by the Regional Office in Venezuela, basic humanitarian aid was given to asylum-seekers and refugees through UNHCR’s NGO partner, and technical advice was provided to several government counterparts. Protection activities included follow-up on the Special Refugee Commission’s refugee status determination procedures, assistance to relevant authorities in the formulation and implementation of public policies, and training for the Commission and other actors dealing with refugee matters. UNHCR and its NGO partner placed emphasis on the local integration of refugees, notably Cubans and Colombians. To this end, it gave particular importance to the documentation of refugees in support of their legal and socio-economic integration.

UNHCR noted with concern the increasing number of Colombians arriving in border areas of Peru, which lack basic social services and formal reception facilities.

The Regional Legal Unit (RLU) based in Costa Rica supported offices in the region by offering legal advice and playing an important role in the promotion of the Mexico Plan of Action, in coordination with other international organizations such as the Organization of American States and its organs, including the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, as well as the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights and the Norwegian Refugee Council. The RLU helped UNHCR offices in the region to organize training sessions on international refugee law, as well as regional training, which benefited more than 125 governmental officials and NGO representatives. It also provided support for global UNHCR training in Hungary (Protection Learning Programme) and Italy (Advanced Course on International Refugee Law and Human Rights). The RLU organized the Third Regional Latin American Course on International Refugee Law, which was held in Argentina for 27 refugee status adjudicators from 14 Latin American countries. The RLU administered UNHCR’s website in Spanish, which is the main source of practical information on refugee law in the Americas. The website was consulted 804,408 times in 2005. It was expanded to include an online donations page, key policy papers and training material, particularly on gender issues.

Funding

Operations in the region received considerable funding. Worthy of particular mention is the support obtained from local embassies, which enabled UNHCR to implement activities – in particular the training of government officials – which would otherwise have been postponed due to funding constraints.

Budget and expenditure (USD)		
Country	Final budget	Expenditure
	Annual programme budget	
Colombia	8,831,410	8,724,668
Costa Rica	1,504,202	1,374,350
Ecuador	3,443,265	3,379,442
Panama	863,725	845,851
Venezuela	1,718,541	1,718,541
Regional projects ¹	934,925	840,730
Total	17,296,068	16,883,582

¹ Includes care and maintenance and durable solutions to refugees in Northern South America.

Restricted voluntary contributions (USD)		
Earmarking ¹	Donor	Annual programme budget
Northern South America		
	Canada	413,223
	Sweden	1,059,002
Sub-total		1,472,225
Colombia		
	<i>Association française de soutien à l'UNHCR</i>	263,821
	Australia for UNHCR	177,238
	<i>España con ACNUR</i>	16,277
	European Commission	2,257,581
	Japan	300,000
	Luxembourg	300,481
	Miscellaneous donors / Private donors in Italy	374,313
	Netherlands	1,205,000
	Norway	296,736
	Spain	1,154,357
	<i>Stichting Vluchteling</i>	127,270
	Switzerland	416,667
	UN Trust Fund for Human Security	356,835
	United Kingdom	66,382
	United States	1,750,000
	USA for UNHCR	30,000
Sub-total		9,092,957
Costa Rica		
	Italy	129,366
Sub-total		129,366
Ecuador		
	European Commission	1,167,315
	Germany	324,254
	Miscellaneous donors / Private donors in Canada	23,037
	Spain	202,977
	Switzerland	236,220
	United Kingdom	30,750
	United States	840,000
Sub-total		2,824,554
Panama		
	United States	180,000
Sub-total		180,000
Venezuela		
	European Commission	376,412
	Italy	323,415
	United States	415,000
Sub-total		1,114,827
Total		14,813,928

¹ For more information on the earmarking, please refer to the donor profiles.