

**REGIONAL STRATEGIC PRESENTATION SUMMARY  
TO 38<sup>th</sup> STANDING COMMITTEE MEETING (6-9 March 2007)**

**Bureau for the Americas**

**Part A: Introduction**

In a complex political environment, following a year of elections and transition in many key countries of Latin America, UNHCR hopes to see Governments upholding their commitments and take full ownership of the Mexico Plan of Action.

Colombia situation: Colombia continues to be caught in a multifaceted internal conflict. With more than 3 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), Colombia has one of the largest displaced populations in the world. According to preliminary governmental figures, more than 170,000 IDPS were registered in 2006.

The Government is the main provider of humanitarian assistance for displaced people in Colombia, approving a budget of US\$ 2 billion for the assistance of displaced people between 2006 and 2010. Government programmes focus mainly on recovery issues, such as housing, income generation, education and health.

Colombia has a very sophisticated legal framework and institutional structure to support the humanitarian response; however its implementation remains inconsistent and the humanitarian situation is still fragile. Government authorities, State institutions and humanitarian agencies report continuing human rights violations, including assassinations and disappearances. Recruitment of children by illegal armed groups continues in various areas and over 1 million children remain out of school. According to Colombian official sources, the casualty rate from landmines has become the highest in the world.

In 2006, an escalation of violence led to new displacements, particularly among indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities in Chocó, Nariño, Norte de Santander and Guajira provinces. Many communities at risk remain trapped in the midst of conflict without any solution in sight.

The impact of the demobilization process remains uncertain. Some groups appear to have reorganized themselves and urban militias are still active in many cities. In addition, some irregular armed elements are trying to move back into areas previously held by the paramilitaries, which has resulted in increased fighting with the military, as well as in the intimidation and targeted killings of the local population.

The aerial spraying of coca crops continues to affect civilian populations and their livestock, forcing them to flee their homes. There have been several social protests this year calling on the Government to put in place alternative plans for people who lose their livelihoods due to these fumigation practices.

The Colombian crisis has affected regional stability. As the conflict continues, more than 500,000 Colombians of concern to UNHCR have fled to other countries in the region, particularly to Ecuador, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Panama and Costa Rica. The conflict now also has a direct impact on Brazil, particularly in the Amazonian region, where local authorities have reported the presence of approximately 17,000 Colombians in need of protection.

Southern Latin America: Although most Colombians continue to seek asylum in neighbouring countries, a growing number of them are opting to go farther afield for security reasons, particularly to Chile, Bolivia and Argentina. Consequently, the number of asylum-seekers in these countries is on the increase.

North America, Central America and the Caribbean: UNHCR strengthened its presence in the Caribbean in order to ensure effective coverage of this important region. Furthermore, UNHCR's immediate focus is on working and coordinating with the concerned States in the event of any major outflow in the region.

**Part B: Progress on UNHCR Global Strategic Objectives (GSOs) and Implementation of the Agenda for Protection**

In this context, the Mexico Plan of Action (MPA) structures UNHCR interventions. The MPA is the agreed framework between UNHCR and 20 Latin American governments to enhance refugee protection and to implement an integrated approach to durable solutions. At this juncture, it is crucial for governments to take greater responsibility for their own refugee programmes. UNHCR is also trying to broaden the number of countries that actually implement the MPA. These efforts will require international support, particularly of the donor community.

Ensure that international standards of protection are met for all persons of concern to UNHCR taking into account their age, gender or personal background (GSO 1, AfP Goal 1)

This will be the first year of the new protection strategies' implementation. The aim is to ensure that Colombians who are in need of protection for reasons related to their flight, but who have not undergone a formal refugee status determination (RSD) procedure or who are not registered, can enjoy basic rights.

In Colombia, UNHCR's current priority remains to bridge the gap between the sophisticated policy and legislation adopted at the central level and their implementation, in particular with regard to situations of new displacement. To this end, and following discussions with the Government of Colombia, UNHCR has expanded its activities in the country. New offices have been opened in Bucaramanga, Villavicencio and Medellín. Furthermore, 130 national and international organizations – including UNHCR and the Colombian Government, have launched in January 2007 a year-long campaign to promote the rights of the IDPs. A draft law supporting the campaign was introduced to Congress by a group of parliamentarians from different parties, last November.

Bridging this gap also requires close inter-agency cooperation. In line with the United Nations Humanitarian Reform Initiative, the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) mission, which took place in September 2006, recommended the establishment of a Humanitarian Country Team, with three thematic groups: protection (lead agency: UNHCR); assistance and basic services (rotating lead agencies: UNICEF, WHO and WFP) and early recovery (joint lead agencies: IOM and UNDP). These conclusions are consistent with the recommendations of the Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on the human rights of internally displaced persons, Mr. Walter Kälin, who published his mission report in January 2007. UNHCR has started to assume its responsibilities and the inter-agency protection group is working on an assessment of protection needs and on the formulation of a consistent protection strategy and action plan for 2007.

The age, diversity and gender mainstreaming (AGDM) strategy is now being applied by all offices in Latin America and by our implementing partners, even in those countries where there is no UNHCR presence. Implementing partners in Belize, Cuba, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, for example, carried out participatory assessments.

In North America, following the completion of UNHCR's monitoring report on the first year of implementation of the Safe Third Country Agreement, Canada formally announced the end of its "direct-back" policy, consistent with principle of *non-refoulement*. This major step is greatly appreciated by UNHCR.

### Protecting refugees within broader migration movements (AfP Goal 2)

UNHCR is actively participating in the various regional forums which deal with migration issues. The Regional Migration Conference (known as the Puebla Process) and the Iberoamerican Summit held in Montevideo in November 2006 adopted key protection safeguards to identify asylum-seekers and refugees within mixed migration flows in the Americas. In 2007, UNHCR is looking forward to strengthening its cooperation with the southern American common market MERCOSUR.

Central America is facing one of the largest, most complicated mixed migration scenarios in the world today with at least 500,000 persons crossing the Mexican-Guatemalan border last year alone. Through its presence in Tapachula, UNHCR is working together with its counterparts in the Mexican Government to promote proper reception, identification, and referral mechanisms along Mexico's porous southern border and extensive coasts. Late 2006, UNHCR presented its analysis and preliminary recommendation in the report "Child Protection at the Southern Border of Mexico: Unaccompanied and Separated Children in the Mixed Migration flow".

### Redouble the search for durable solutions (GSO 3, AfP 1, 3 and 5)

UNHCR maintains its focus on the implementation of the durable solutions segment of the MPA, either through supporting host communities in achieving the integration and self-reliance of refugees in both urban centres (Cities of Solidarity) and border areas (Borders of Solidarity).

UNHCR hopes to see additional countries in Latin America develop resettlement programmes. The February 2006 Quito Meeting on 'Solidarity Resettlement' served to enhance the resettlement segment of the Mexico Plan of Action and was followed by a set of concrete proposals to boost the functioning and the sustainability of the programme. The subsequent meetings of the Working Group on Resettlement and the Annual Tripartite Consultations in March and June provided the opportunity to convert the recommendations of the Quito meeting into more concrete proposals and to gather greater support and commitment from both emerging and traditional resettlement countries. Overall, the main concern for the sustainability of the programme is how to ensure the effective integration of resettled refugees in their host communities. Substantive contributions have already been received and UNHCR would like to express its particular appreciation to the Governments of Canada, Norway and United States of America in this regard.

UNHCR continues to work closely with the United States of America and Canada in the implementation of their respective resettlement programmes, the largest worldwide. Both countries have provided much needed financial support to enhance UNHCR's capacity and efficiency in the implementation of resettlement programmes in major operations.

UNHCR continues to raise its concern with the United States Government with regard to the application of the Material Support Bar. This bar impedes thousands of refugees in need of resettlement from having access to the United States, and affects various individuals with a well-founded fear of persecution from being granted refugee status in the United States. Discussions are ongoing between UNHCR and the United States Government on this issue.

*UNHCR*  
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