

Update on UNHCR's operations in the Americas Executive Committee 2007

Part A: Major Developments

- The Mexico Plan of Action (MPA) is the agreed framework between UNHCR and 20 Latin American Governments to enhance refugee protection and implement an integrated approach to durable solutions. After three years of implementation of the Plan, the Office has evaluated its impact on the lives of the people it aims to protect. A comprehensive assessment has been conducted and a report will be released on the occasion of the 58th plenary session of the Executive Committee. The conclusions of the report, and the event which is being held to mark this, will be important for determining the way forward under the MPA framework.
- Colombia remains caught up in a multifaceted internal conflict. According to the Government, more than 200,000 internally displaced persons (IDPs) were registered in 2006 alone.
- Colombia has a very sophisticated legal framework and institutional structure in support of the humanitarian response. The Government remains the main provider of humanitarian assistance for displaced people in Colombia (a budgetary allocation of USD 2 billion has been approved for this purpose for the period 2006–2010). However, important gaps persist at the field level in the State's response to the internal displacement crisis.
- On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the 1997 IDP legislation, UNHCR launched a public awareness campaign "2007: Year of the Rights of Displaced People" to lobby for displaced people's rights. The Colombian Senate has adopted draft legislation in support of the campaign's objectives. Last July, the United States Congress passed a resolution supporting the 2007 Campaign for the Rights of Displaced People in Colombia. The resolution commends the work of UNHCR and calls on the Government of Colombia and on the international community to address the protection and humanitarian needs of displaced people.
- Aerial spraying of coca crops continues to affect civilian populations and their livestock, forcing them to flee their homes. An escalation of violence in various departments has resulted in new displacement, with indigenous communities especially affected by group displacements and targeted killings in Choco and Nariño provinces. Nariño province, in the south-east of the country near the border with Ecuador, has witnessed some of the worst scenes of violence this year, resulting in several waves of mass displacements in the past few months.
- The displacement has had a direct impact on neighbouring countries, particularly Ecuador, which registered the highest number of asylum claims ever during the summer of 2007. Ecuador recently launched a plan for development and peace for the northern border area (Plan Ecuador), and is considering regularizing the status of all Colombians on its territory. This plan offers new possibilities for improving the asylum regime and addressing the needs of refugees and other

Colombians of concern. UNHCR is conducting a countrywide survey to identify the magnitude and needs of unregistered Colombians in need of international protection. The survey has now been completed for the northern provinces bordering Colombia, where it appears that 60 to 70 per cent of Colombians are in need of international protection. A similar exercise is about to be conducted in Brazil and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela.

- Uruguay and Paraguay have recently signed an agreement with UNHCR to establish resettlement programmes within the framework of the MPA, as is already the case in Argentina, Brazil and Chile. For the first time, refugees from outside the region are benefiting from the MPA. A group of 100 Palestinian refugees from Iraq, who are currently in Jordan, are being resettled to Brazil.

Part B: Progress on Strategic Objectives and Agenda for Protection

- UNHCR's efforts are focused in the MPA and on increasing the number of countries that are turning the principles of the Plan into concrete action. The Office is also aiming to raise the level of international support, particularly of the donor community, for this endeavour. .

Ensuring international standards of protection are met for all persons of concern to UNHCR taking into account their age, gender or personal background, Global Strategic Objective 1 – AfP Goal 1

- UNHCR is implementing a situational protection strategy to ensure a coherent protection response in all countries involved, including Colombia. One of the main challenges is to make sure that Colombians in neighbouring countries who are in need of protection for reasons related to their flight can enjoy basic rights, despite not being registered or having undergone a formal refugee status determination procedure. The survey carried out in Ecuador will allow better identification of their protection needs.
- In Colombia, UNHCR's current priority lies in bridging the gap between the sophisticated policy and legislation adopted at the central level and their implementation in the Field, in particular in situations of new displacement.
- The age, gender and diversity mainstreaming strategy is now being applied by all offices in Latin America, and by our implementing partners in countries where there is no UNHCR presence.
- In the Caribbean, UNHCR continues to monitor and assist Governments to strengthen eligibility bodies. One of the main objectives is to ensure a fair, rapid and effective response to identify and protect refugees in the context of larger economic migration movements. UNHCR's newly established presence in Miami has facilitated coverage of the region. In North America, the Office's objectives include building awareness of, and respect for, refugees and asylum-seekers. Despite complex asylum processes, both Canada and the United States have the highest acceptance rates for industrialized countries.

Redouble the search for durable solutions, Global Strategic Objective 3 – AfP Goals 1, 3 and 5

- UNHCR has continued to raise its concern with the United States Government with regard to the application of the Material Support Bar, which, while mitigated by limited waivers, impedes thousands of refugees in need of resettlement from having access to the United States. The bar also affects the granting of refugee status within the United States to some people with a well-founded fear of persecution. Discussions on this issue are being pursued between UNHCR and the United States Government.
- UNHCR has continued to focus on implementing the durable solutions segment of the MPA which foresees helping host communities with the integration of refugees and IDPS, as well as supporting self-reliance of displaced people in both urban centres (*Cities of Solidarity*) and border areas (*Borders of Solidarity*). At this juncture, it is crucial for Governments to take greater responsibility for their resettlement programmes
- UNHCR has continued to work closely with the United States and Canada in the implementation of their respective resettlement programmes, which are the largest worldwide. The United States has also provided much needed financial support to enhance UNHCR's capacity and efficiency in the implementation of resettlement programmes in major operations.

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