



Central America and Mexico

Recent developments

In 2004, some 1,340 persons sought asylum in Mexico and Central America. They were often part of mixed flows of undocumented migrants to the North, making it a challenge for UNHCR to ensure their access to asylum procedures, and ensure alternatives to administrative detention. The region has become an increasingly restrictive migratory environment, with widespread use of interception, detention and large-scale organized deportation of undocumented persons. However, there are countries in the region which remain receptive to the needs of refugees and asylum-seekers, and show readiness to continue their cooperation with UNHCR in strengthening their national capacity to deal with refugees and asylum-seekers in accordance with international and regional standards.

Belize

Costa Rica

El Salvador

Guatemala

Honduras

Mexico

Nicaragua

Costa Rica continues to host the largest number of Colombian refugees in Latin America, with more than 8,000 Colombians out of a refugee population of 13,500. Although the total number of new arrivals from Colombia has declined over the past two years, the average number of refugees recognized in the country still exceeds 1,500 per year. The continuous arrival of refugees in Costa Rica has had an impact on the society where



the immigrant population is estimated at some 10 per cent of the total population. A revised Law on Immigration is expected to be finalized by the National Assembly before the end of 2004 which will include a chapter on asylum that will preserve certain minimal statutory elements and will enhance the local protection regime. UNHCR has made draft proposals for the new law including: provisions on the principle of *non-refoulement*; the refugee definition (including the Cartagena refugee definition); the competences of a refugee authority in charge of the asylum procedure; refugee documentation; and other 1951 Convention rights. The immigration law is expected to enhance the status of refugees in Costa Rica, and favour the prospects for local integration.

UNHCR's Regional Legal Unit (RLU) in Costa Rica provides technical support to strengthen the legal framework in the region. It promotes and disseminates refugee law, enhances cooperation with the organs of the Inter-American system, integrates human rights standards into refugee protection, and provides legal advice to offices in the region. The Unit's Spanish language website www.acnur.org provides refugee law and country of origin information, and has become a very widely used resource.

Strategic objectives

In 2005, UNHCR will strengthen the protection capacities of governments and local partners in the region by: 1) providing financial and technical support to governments to implement refugee status determination in conformity with international refugee law; 2) building the capacity of national authorities on refugee law issues, so that they are better equipped to identify asylum-seekers within mixed migration flows; 3) providing support to civil society through training on refugee issues, so that they can better contribute to the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers within a national protection framework; 4) strengthening partnerships with key national human rights organizations, and increasing their awareness of, and commitment to, international refugee law; and, 5) building public awareness regarding the plight of refugees in order to combat all negative images associated with refugees, as well as to foster support for UNHCR's work. The Office will intensify its efforts to identify durable solutions for refugees through local integration activities, such as micro-credit schemes and helping refugees to find employment.

It is expected that in 2005, there will be some 9,500 Colombian refugees in Costa Rica, including a high percentage of "long stayers". Due to the precarious situation in Colombia, the limited prospects for voluntary repatriation, and the challenges faced by Colombian refugees to integrate locally in Costa Rica, UNHCR is concerned that some could find themselves caught in a protracted refugee situation. The Office will therefore focus on building the capacity of governmental and non-governmental institutions to address the difficulties faced by refugees striving to achieve self-sufficiency. UNHCR will continue to implement a small resettlement programme to assist those refugees for whom local integration is not possible.

UNHCR's RLU, in cooperation with the Inter-American System and others, will train, disseminate, and promote refugee law, as well as give technical advice to strengthen the capacities of governments, NGOs, and other relevant sectors of civil society.

Operations

In **Mexico**, UNHCR will focus on strengthening its relations with the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR) through training in refugee law. The Office will encourage COMAR to participate in North-South and South-South exchanges on refugee issues to foster professionalism, and strengthen its relations with counterparts elsewhere in the region; train migration and border authorities on refugee law; enhance cooperation with key human rights institutions; and strengthen the national protection network, including fostering interchanges between civil society groups along the northern and southern borders.

UNHCR will assist the Government to complete the naturalization of approximately 2,000 Guatemalan refugees, along with almost 2,800 urban refugees of various nationalities. The majority of the urban refugees have successfully integrated, but there is a small group of refugees from outside the region who continue to experience a language barrier in their search for employment. In 2005, UNHCR

will work towards locally integrating all refugees through micro-credit schemes, and by providing them with assistance in seeking employment.

In **Costa Rica**, UNHCR will pursue durable solutions for refugees through local integration, which will increase their self-sufficiency, and reduce their dependence on material assistance. The Office will work towards creating operational agreements and cooperating with government agencies and academic and non-governmental organizations. Working in close coordination with IOM, the Resettlement and Special Cases Section at Headquarters, and selected resettlement countries, UNHCR will resettle those refugees who are having difficulty integrating in Costa Rica.

In **Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras** and **Nicaragua**, there are 780 refugees of various nationalities, mainly from urban backgrounds. In Guatemala, El Salvador and Nicaragua, there are long staying refugees from Central America.

UNHCR will endeavour to improve national legal frameworks, and engage in intensive advocacy and monitoring activities through: training on refugee law; participation in working groups drafting legislation and eligibility committees; and the direct lobbying of government officials, international entities, and civil society. The overarching aim of these activities is to ensure that countries' existing legislation is implemented in accordance





Mexico: Refugees receiving land deeds. *UNHCR*

with international standards. At the same time, complementary advocacy activities will be implemented by UNHCR's partners.

UNHCR will strengthen its cooperation with the Inter-American System of human rights, as well as with national protection networks. UNHCR staff will train implementing partners on programme delivery, monitoring, and reporting.

Budget (USD)

Country	Annual Programme
Costa Rica	1,598,163
Mexico	1,579,606
Regional activities ¹	1,142,500
Total	4,320,269

¹ Includes legal assistance for new arrivals in Mexico and Central America, regional promotion and consolidation of durable solutions in Central America, Cuba and Mexico, promotion and dissemination of refugee law and scholarships for refugee students.