

# CENTRAL AMERICA AND MEXICO

**Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua**

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## RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

In March 2002, the Government of **Mexico** assumed responsibility for the refugee status determination (RSD) process through the establishment of a Working Group on Eligibility chaired by the Mexican Commission for the Assistance of Refugees (COMAR). In **Costa Rica**, 2,710 new asylum-seekers claimed refugee status, of whom 2,630 came from Colombia. The visa requirements imposed on Colombian nationals in April caused a drop in the number of asylum applications.

The human rights situation in **Guatemala** deteriorated amid a rising tide of violence directly targeting human rights activists, witnesses of human rights violations, journalists, NGOs, politicians and church figures.

In Central America, overall rates of asylum applications remained at the same level as the previous year, with Colombians making up the largest national group. However, in Mexico, there was a 40 per cent decrease in asylum applications. This reduction can be partly linked to the transition of refugee status determination procedures from UNHCR to the Government and the stricter border controls implemented in the wake of 11 September events.

## PROGRESS TOWARDS OBJECTIVES, AND CONSTRAINTS ENCOUNTERED

In the entire region, activities were implemented with special attention to gender needs. This yielded some positive results: equal delivery of immigration documents to women and men; equal access to own land; and targeted care provided to women and children according to an assessment of needs.

In **Costa Rica**, UNHCR supported an RSD project, which reduced the backlog from

2,410 cases in December 2001, to some 250 cases in June 2002.

In **Mexico**, Guatemalan refugees in the State of Chiapas, benefited from the fast-track naturalisation procedure. 600 cases were submitted with processing costs paid by the Government of Mexico. Naturalisation of long-staying refugees, mainly from Central America, residing in urban areas, is being handed over to the Mexican authorities. In collaboration with UNHCR's implementing partner, 27 naturalisation cards were issued and 119 cases are still pending. In addition, due to the tight security measures put into place after 11 September, there have been delays in the issuance of residence permits to recognised refugees. This has in effect, postponed the possibility for some 144 refugees to receive or renew their work permits.

In Central America, limited economic opportunities and a high-level of unemployment in the region, pose a challenge for the integration of refugees. Large naturalisation programmes planned for **Guatemala, El Salvador** and **Nicaragua** were not implemented, partly due to the change in government and the arrival of new officials within the Migration Directorates.

UNHCR supports the regional protection networks, involving government and/or state institutions as well as NGO partners. The aim is to devolve a greater degree of responsibility for the provision of protection and humanitarian assistance for refugees to local institutions. This type of structure has endowed refugees with access to low-cost or

free health care, as well as to language and vocational training opportunities.

### **ACTIVITIES UNTIL 30 JUNE 2002**

UNHCR made efforts to further strengthen regional protection networks involving Government and/or State institutions, as well as NGO partners. A local NGO in **Mexico** succeeded in covering some 10 per cent of its activities for refugees from a grant provided by the local government and donations given by an international foundation. 378 refugees (including 150 women) were provided with a subsistence allowance, health care, education, as well as a cash grant to cover documentation fees, through UNHCR's implementing partner. Refugees benefited from preferential rates for health and mental health care through the Office's negotiations with private and public hospitals, as well as with local psychologists. From January to June 2002, UNHCR organised 76 "Education for Peace" activities attended by some 1,708 students from high schools and universities.

In the southern State of Chiapas, UNHCR shifted its activities from humanitarian assistance and measures to facilitate the local integration of Guatemalan refugees to training in refugee law, border monitoring and strengthening relations with the National Migration Institute and local NGOs. Through these activities, UNHCR aimed to provide asylum-seekers with free and fair access to the territory and to RSD procedures - given the strict controls enforced at the border to restrict illegal migration. UNHCR also undertook two training seminars on international refugee law for 43 migration officials based in the border areas.

In **Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua**, the Office provided eligibility training to migration officers, police, and new government officials responsible for RSD. 764 officials benefited from 15 training sessions focused on refugee rights and international protection. In **El Salvador**, 70 students (including 45 women) in law, journalism, and foreign affairs, participated

in six seminars on the principles of refugee protection.

UNHCR participated in the seventh Regional Conference on Migration (Puebla Process) held in Guatemala in May 2002, which noted the importance of refugee protection in its Plan of Action. The resolution on terrorism adopted by the Conference also reflected UNHCR's position that anti-terrorism measures should take into account human rights law.

In Mexico, following up on the recommendations of the First Consultation with Refugee Women, a Second Consultation took place in June 2002, with a special focus on urban refugee women, resulting in the creation of a refugee women's committee. The committee will be responsible for co-ordinating activities between the refugees, the Government and UNHCR, as well as proposing activities in favour of the local integration of refugees. The National Eligibility Commission also hired two female protection assistants to ensure gender sensitivity during interviews.

In June 2002, World Refugee Day (WRD) events were organised throughout the region. In Mexico, there were commemorative activities which took place throughout the entire month, including two film festivals dedicated to WRD and a roundtable discussion on refugee women. A park dedicated to refugees was inaugurated and plaques commemorating refugees in the Americas installed. In the park, a conference centre and a documentation centre on refugees were constructed. These will eventually be available for cultural events organised by refugees.

UNHCR and the OAS conducted joint trainings on human rights and refugee protection for NGOs and other sectors of civil society. UNHCR's efforts to strengthen its partnership with the OAS produced positive results, as can be seen by the resolution on the protection of refugees, returnees and internally displaced persons

adopted at the OAS General Assembly in Barbados in June 2002.

The UNHCR Website in Spanish was updated and now contains more than 1,500 legal documents online. In June 2002, more than 12,000 users consulted some 86,000 pages. This site has become one of the main protection tools for the dissemination of information on refugee law in the Americas.

#### **OUTLOOK FOR JULY - DECEMBER 2002**

UNHCR will continue to support governments as they proceed to take over the responsibility for RSD. Special emphasis will be placed on Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala and Nicaragua which are more advanced in the process. These countries have already established or are in the process of establishing eligibility committees. For these countries, UNHCR will provide training on refugee protection and technical support to their national eligibility committee.

In Mexico, a plan of action is being developed for the comprehensive training of local authorities in the National Migration Department. UNHCR will also provide legal advice to COMAR and the Ministry of the

Interior, in particular, during the revision of the General Population Act and the drafting of a new refugee law. UNHCR will continue to promote the access of asylum-seekers to RSD procedures, in light of stricter border controls.

UNHCR's participation in the Regional Conference on Migration will be fundamental in ensuring that governments include safeguards for refugee protection when adopting comprehensive approaches in dealing with mixed population flows. UNHCR will also participate in the Technical Committee Meeting in October 2002, in preparation for the eighth Conference, to be held in Mexico in February 2003.

In Mexico, the possible reduction in the regional programme budget may reduce the number of eligibility trainings that will be carried out to government counterparts. This may affect UNHCR's efforts to transfer all RSD responsibilities to the National Eligibility Committee.

#### **Financial Data (USD)**

Country / Activity	Annual Programme Budget			
	Initial Budget	Revised Budget	Total Funds Available	Obligation Level
Costa Rica	918,679	1,396,179	688,800	688,800
Mexico	1,795,353	1,802,353	865,200	865,200
Regional Projects <sup>1</sup>	1,874,200	1,874,200	831,548	841,593
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>4,588,232</b>	<b>5,072,732</b>	<b>2,385,548</b>	<b>2,395,593</b>

<sup>1</sup>Includes voluntary repatriation, local integration of refugees from Central America, Cuba, Mexico, legal assistance for new arrivals in Mexico and Central America, regional promotion of refugee law and gender mains as well as consolidation of durable solutions in Central America, Cuba, Mexico, and promotion of refugee law and scholarships for refugee students.