

SOUTH AMERICA

NORTHERN SOUTH AMERICA

Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Panama, Peru, Suriname, Venezuela

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Since the collapse of the peace process in Colombia in February 2002, clashes between guerrillas (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* or FARC) and paramilitary groups (*Auto Defensas de Colombia* or AUC) have intensified, causing more displacement and bringing untold suffering to the civilian population. According to UNHCR's Government counterpart *Red de Solidaridad Social* (RSS) there were 129,000 new Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) during the first five months of 2002, compared to 83,000 during the same period last year. Mounting insecurity and armed confrontations in border areas have also caused an increasing number of Colombians to seek international protection in the neighbouring countries of Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela, where growing resentment and expressions of xenophobia have been directed against Colombians, and where growing signs of social, economic and political instability has been an evidence.

In the first half of 2002, Presidential and Congressional elections took place in Colombia. The newly elected President, Alvaro Uribe Velez, is planning to strengthen the State's military and constitutional response to wage the internal conflict. However, an intensification of the armed conflict and a worsening of the humanitarian crisis are feared as a result of these measures.

Besides the conflict in Colombia, there are other factors of political and economic instability in the region. On 11 April, the Venezuelan army briefly removed and then restored President Hugo Chavez to power. As the Government's policies continue to be subject to controversy, there are concerns that prospects for national reconciliation are slim. Both Ecuador and Peru also witnessed

a series of violent protests over social, economic, and political issues in the first half of 2002.

PROGRESS TOWARDS OBJECTIVES, AND CONSTRAINTS ENCOUNTERED

UNHCR continued to pursue a regional strategy that aims at supporting an effective State and civil society response to internal displacement in Colombia and at reinforcing protection and assistance solutions for refugees and asylum-seekers in neighbouring countries.

During the reporting period, substantive improvements have been made in the delivery of emergency assistance and the development of an information system on IDPs. However, action by the Government has not succeeded in preventing further displacement, nor achieving effective implementation of reintegration and socio-economic stabilisation programmes for IDPs. National protection networks established by UNHCR with the Church and NGO partners contributed to improve border monitoring and delivery of emergency assistance in both Colombia and the neighbouring asylum countries. The chairperson of EXCOM visited Colombia and Venezuela in the early months of 2002 and drew attention to the need for reinforced prevention and protection measures on behalf of the IDPs. UNHCR also organised several media events, including the May visit to Ecuador by UNHCR Goodwill Ambassador Angelina Jolie, to increase public awareness of the Colombian situation.

In neighbouring asylum countries, significant progress was made in improving national refugee legislation. In Ecuador, UNHCR worked closely with the Government to improve refugee status determination procedures and reduce the backlog of

asylum claims. UNHCR held a very fruitful discussion with the Government of Panama in May to revise the Refugee Decree 23/1998 which currently only provides temporary humanitarian status to Colombian asylum-seekers. In Venezuela, UNHCR held several discussions with the Government to establish the implementation regulations of the recently introduced refugee law. At the same time, insecurity in the region, in particular border areas, and limited State presence continue to hamper UNHCR and NGO access to IDPs, refugees and other persons affected by the conflict. Attacks, kidnappings and armed confrontations are still frequent. In May, UNHCR, supported by OCHA, participated in the deployment of a UN Emergency Response team to Chocó to address massive displacement, after the massacre of 119 civilians as a consequence of combats between armed factions.

As a response to the deteriorating humanitarian situation, the UNHCR-headed UN Thematic Group on Displacement in Colombia elaborated a common framework for IDPs known as the Humanitarian Plan of Action to ensure that activities on behalf of IDPs are implemented in a coordinated manner. The plan was shared with the Government, the international community and NGOs and will be officially launched during the second semester of the year. Immediately after the May elections, an ad hoc working group was created between the UN Thematic Group on Displacement and a team established by the Vice President-elect to agree on a common approach to address internal displacement.

ACTIVITIES UNTIL 30 JUNE 2002

In Colombia, UNHCR's activities focused on capacity-building and training State entities responsible for the response to internal displacement, such as the RSS, the Ombudsman's Office, the General Procurator's Office and the National Registry. The Joint Technical Unit of the RSS, with the participation of UNHCR, works with 64 territorial committees in high-risk regions, and has elaborated 29

contingency plans. Through the Ombudsman's Office, UNHCR continued to promote State presence in high-risk areas, supporting IDP and women associations. UNHCR-supported documentation campaigns enabled 4,338 displaced persons to be included in the National Registry and to receive identity cards.

At the local level, emphasis was placed on promoting the application of national IDP policies through legal aid, training on management of income-generating projects, community leadership, IDP legislation and women's rights. These activities benefited 80 IDP associations (representing some 25,000 IDPs) and 27 displaced women associations (representing some 8,000 IDP women). The "peace education project" to assist IDP children was expanded to 150 new schools with 320 teachers participating in training activities benefiting 9,600 children. UNHCR conducted a survey on affected indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities to identify and better address their specific needs. In Urabá, a peace committee was created through UNHCR's coordination work to defend the rights of indigenous communities. Country of origin information on Colombia was updated in order to establish new eligibility guidelines for Colombian asylum-seekers.

In Ecuador, the number of Colombian refugees and asylum-seekers, which at the end of 2001 stood at 4,517, steadily increased. A total of 2,211 were reported in the first half of 2002, of whom 876 obtained refugee status. This makes an average of 370 new asylum-seekers entering every month, 100 more per month than last year. If the trend continues, the number of refugees and asylum-seekers could reach 8,900 by year-end, about 4,400 more than in 2001. The Eligibility Commission, with the participation of UNHCR, has been meeting regularly throughout the reporting period, which has contributed to a reduction in the backlog of asylum claims. UNHCR reinforced partnerships and coordination mechanisms with key NGO stakeholders to jointly address

additional needs of Colombian refugees and receiving communities.

In Panama, there were 89 new asylum applications, the majority from Colombians, although this does not reflect the actual number of asylum-seekers entering remote border areas to which UNHCR does not have access. Following the adoption of restrictive entry requirements for Colombians, UNHCR's efforts concentrated on the improvement of the legal framework and on ensuring that asylum-seekers are granted access to the territory and to RSD procedures.

In Venezuela, some 440 Colombian asylum-seekers approached UNHCR or its implementing partners for protection or assistance. Many more Colombians in need of protection settled in remote border areas or smaller urban centres without filing applications for refugee status, given that the Government has still to establish RSD procedures. UNHCR continued to assist authorities in the elaboration of these procedures and provide training to civilian and military authorities on refugee rights. Considering that areas along the Venezuelan border are among the most insecure in Colombia, UNHCR developed a joint contingency plan with the Venezuelan authorities to address potential mass influxes.

In Peru, UNHCR focused on the revision of the national refugee decree providing technical advice to the Government.

OUTLOOK FOR JULY-DECEMBER 2002

Given that major post-election political changes are to be expected in Colombia, current displacement trends are likely to continue and mass movements of population might occur in the second half of the year. This underscores the need to have efficient early warning mechanisms and constantly updated contingency plans. Several regional initiatives will be undertaken, including a regional PARinAC meeting, joint missions to border areas and training initiatives aimed

at the reinforcement of regional protection networks.

In Colombia, special attention will be paid to the relationship with the new Government. Cooperation with the new Red de Solidaridad Social and the set-up of the Joint Technical Unit will be reviewed to meet the needs of IDPs and to address the challenges of the current humanitarian crisis. With the support of OCHA, UNHCR will continue to promote effective co-ordination among the UN agencies, a major step being the completion and implementation of the Humanitarian Plan of Action.

UNHCR offices in the region will continue to work on better asylum procedures to make sure that fleeing Colombians in need of international protection have access to these procedures. Protection networks at the border will continue to be supported through the reinforcement of UNHCR's presence and the consolidation of institutional alliances. In addition, a comprehensive survey of the situation of Colombians in neighbouring countries will be initiated to have a better profile of this caseload and identify major patterns of mobility and behaviour. An evaluation of UNHCR's operation in Colombia will take place in September, of which the outcome will be used to formulate an operational plan for 2003 to 2004. In Ecuador, priority will be given to further reduction of the backlog of 3,042 asylum applications.

A major constraint for the implementation of UNHCR's mandate is the region's political instability and the deteriorating socio-economic situation, which could lead to restrictive asylum and migration policies.

SOUTHERN SOUTH AMERICA

Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Due to political and economic crises, Argentina, Bolivia and Paraguay are all experiencing increased social unrest, negatively affecting refugees and asylum-seekers seeking income and employment opportunities.

The political and economic instability that has characterised the situation of several countries in this region, in particularly Argentina, have adversely affected income and job opportunities for refugees and asylum-seekers. These and other difficulties are described in more detail below.

PROGRESS TOWARDS OBJECTIVES, AND CONSTRAINTS ENCOUNTERED

UNHCR's activities in Southern South America are primarily aimed at promoting and supporting the local integration of about 6,200 refugees residing in the region. During the first semester, some 3,700 benefited from UNHCR counselling and material assistance. New arrivals (asylum-seekers) totalled nearly 500. There are some 2,500 applications for asylum still pending decision by the relevant government bodies involved in refugee status determination.

As economic resources in the region are insufficient to provide adequate levels of assistance to refugees due to the current economic crisis, UNHCR continues to fill in gaps with assistance programmes until governmental and non-governmental national institutions are able to take over. This is most evident in Argentina, where the State and civil society are presently covering around 20 percent of refugee needs compared to 48 percent in 2001.

Paraguay adopted a national refugee law in July 2002, largely based on a model law presented by UNHCR in the context of efforts to reach a regional harmonisation in the six countries in the region.

In April, a second resettlement selection mission took place to Azerbaijan and Pakistan with the participation of the Government of Chile, UNHCR and its implementing partner. Fifty-one individuals were interviewed in Baku and Islamabad and their cases have been submitted to the Government of Chile.

An agreement on migrant smuggling was reached between MERCOSUR countries based on the text of the Palermo Protocol. UNHCR worked closely with Government representatives to ensure that international refugee protection standards were respected. A similar agreement is expected to be adopted on trafficking.

In the context of a PARinAC meeting, which took place on 9 to 10 May in Santiago de Chile, the regional local integration strategy was re-assessed. One of the major outcomes, was the decision to initiate micro-credit projects in the region as a response to sharply diminished employment and labour insertion opportunities for refugees.

ACTIVITIES UNTIL 30 JUNE 2002

Argentina agreed to implement an RSD project aimed at strengthening the National Refugee Committee, CEPARE, and reduce the backlog in asylum claims. UNHCR co-sponsored a migrant and refugee law clinic along with two prominent human rights NGOs and the University of Buenos Aires.

A first group of resettled refugees comprising 23 Afghans were received in April 2002 in Brazil. The group was the focus of high official attention and the event was widely covered by the media. The refugees were immediately provided with identity cards and work permits. A second group of 22 refugees is expected to arrive during the latter half of the year.

UNHCR worked closely with implementing partners throughout the region to address the protection needs of refugee women and children. Special attention was paid to domestic violence and women's health care needs particularly reproductive health. In Brazil, Argentina and Chile, through agreements with public or private institutions, special assistance for mental health, consisting of counselling, psychological support, orientation for job searching activities, was provided to some 3,300 vulnerable refugees (30 per cent women).

Some 220 refugees (10 per cent women) attended vocational training to improve their local integration prospects. Some 20 small businesses in the region were supported by UNHCR through income-generating projects. A micro-credit scheme was designed in Argentina involving local institutions and refugee beneficiaries

The frequent distribution of information material, such as TV spots, press advertisements and printed articles, and events organised by UNHCR in celebration of World Refugee Day succeeded in increasing public interest in refugee issues. Significant contributions from the private sector were raised in the form of free media slots, amounting to some USD 333,346.

OUTLOOK FOR JULY-DECEMBER 2002

UNHCR is currently in the process of carrying out fact-finding missions to three critical border crossings where large migration flows and migrant smuggling occur; the "Triple Border" shared by Argentina, Brazil and Paraguay, the Peruvian-Bolivian border and the border between Bolivia and Argentina. The aim is to evaluate the functioning of the asylum process in border areas, where refugees are often intermingled with high numbers of illegal migrants transiting in the region, and to ensure that asylum-seekers have access to countries and to the procedures.

The efforts invested throughout the years by UNHCR in the region in expanding the support of the civil society in favour of refugees have been affected recently by the severe economic hardship endured by large segments of the population in each country. Renewed focus will be placed on the development of micro-credit activities for refugees to mitigate the impact of the regional crisis and to provide sustainable income for long-staying refugees.

Financial Data (USD)

Country / Activity	Annual Programme Budget			
	Initial Budget	Revised Budget	Total Funds Available	Obligation Level
Northern South America				
Colombia	4,398,476	4,552,476	2,663,500	2,242,300
Ecuador	1,271,637	1,273,137	521,300	521,300
Panama	392,500	392,500	207,979	170,000
Venezuela	1,671,525	1,788,819	857,900	857,900
Regional Activities ¹	752,700	752,700	188,175	188,175
Sub-total	8,486,838	8,759,632	4,438,854	3,979,675
Southern South America				
Argentina	1,336,471	1,340,851	643,700	643,700
Regional Activities ²	2,148,100	2,148,100	1,126,082	1,073,800
Sub-total	3,484,571	3,488,951	1,769,782	1,717,500
TOTAL	11,971,409	12,248,583	6,208,636	5,697,175

¹ Includes local integration and repatriation assistance to refugees in Guyana, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela

² Includes local integration of refugees in Southern South American countries.