

Colombia Situation

Operational highlights

- In line with the Mexico Plan of Action, a new strategy was developed to give more emphasis to the protection and assistance of unregistered Colombians of concern to UNHCR.
- The Borders of Solidarity and Cities of Solidarity pillars of the Mexico Plan of Action were further developed to address the needs of the majority of some 500,000 Colombians requiring international protection. During the year, over 100 projects were implemented to foster a positive environment for local integration and good coordination with local development plans.
- The Quito Meeting on Resettlement in Solidarity served to strengthen resettlement as a strategic protection and durable solutions pillar of the Mexico Plan of Action. Some 800 refugees were resettled in countries outside the region and 45 people were resettled within the region.
- Inter-agency collaboration in the region was further reinforced. The UNHCR-led Northern Border Inter-Agency Thematic Group in Ecuador implemented a wide variety of social programmes in four border provinces hosting Colombians in need of international protection.

Working environment

The political landscape in the subregion was marked by presidential elections. Ruling candidates won the elections in Colombia and in Venezuela, whereas politics changed with the return of former presidents in

Colombia

Costa Rica

Ecuador

Panama

Peru

Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)



Costa Rica and Peru and the victory of a new president in Ecuador.

The regional scenario was dominated by tensions between Colombia and two of its neighbours, Venezuela and Ecuador, on issues related to the deterioration of security in border areas and the impact of fumigation of coca crops in the northern provinces of Ecuador.

In recent years, the conflict in Colombia has shifted closer to the borders. In 2006, the humanitarian situation worsened in the provinces of Nariño, Putumayo, Norte de Santander, César, Arauca and Chocó. This led to a steady influx of Colombians into Ecuador, Venezuela, Panama and Costa Rica. At the end of the year, the presence of Colombians of concern to the Office was also reported in Brazil and Peru.

In 2006, over 11,000 Colombians applied for asylum in neighbouring countries. The majority of Colombians do not, however, seek asylum. This is due to the weak State presence in remote areas, lack of information on asylum procedures, and the fear of discrimination or becoming the target of irregular armed groups. It is estimated that some 500,000 unregistered Colombians live scattered in poor border communities and marginal neighbourhoods in the big cities of the region. Their lack of legal status makes them extremely vulnerable to deportation and hinders their access to basic human rights, such as education and health care. Ethnic minorities, particularly indigenous groups and Afro-Colombians, have been disproportionately affected by forced displacement. In 2006, various indigenous groups (e.g. Wayuu, Jivis, Awa

and Embera) were forced to cross the border and to settle in neighbouring countries for extended periods of time.

Achievements and impact

UNHCR's strategy in the region is consistent with the Mexico Plan of Action. In 2006, the focus was on strengthening the capacity of States and civil society to protect and assist the majority of people of concern. Given the prevailing conditions in Colombia, which did not allow for voluntary repatriation, UNHCR concentrated on finding solutions through local integration and resettlement.

The Office reviewed planning and implementation in order to consolidate the age, gender and diversity approach. Participatory assessments were carried out in all countries. The main needs and risks identified by the refugees themselves were lack of documentation, limited access to land and labour exploitation. Consequently, various projects were launched to support refugee families in the critical areas of psycho-social counselling, awareness on sexual and gender-based violence, and self-reliance strategies, particularly for women and adolescents.

UNHCR also consolidated its protection and self-reliance strategies within the framework of the Borders of Solidarity and Cities of Solidarity pillars. The community support and integration programmes strengthened the relationship between local communities and Colombians, while allowing UNHCR and its partners to promote

refugee protection. Over 100 projects were implemented in the region, for some 50,000 people in 47 host communities. In addition, over 600 loans or grants were provided to support small businesses. Vocational and management training programmes benefited some 550 refugees.

In the spirit of solidarity and responsibility-sharing, resettlement continued to be a strategic protection tool in the region, particularly for women at risk. In 2006, 739 Colombian refugees were resettled, predominantly from Ecuador and Costa Rica, but also some refugees with specific needs from Venezuela and Panama.

Resettlement within the region was further pursued and 117 refugees, mostly Colombians, were resettled in Chile, Argentina and Brazil.

Constraints

Electoral campaigning made it difficult to push forward refugee initiatives because most public decisions were postponed. The continuity of programmes was also affected by the significant changes to the staff in public offices, including the offices concentrating on refugee affairs.

Security remains the main concern for the delivery of protection and assistance in the region. Violent incidents were increasingly reported in border areas, such as the imposition of ransom fees, death threats and assassinations. In some border areas, local and Colombian families fled from their communities due to pressure from irregular armed groups. Some humanitarian workers received anonymous threats and several asylum-seekers disappeared or were killed. Violence also reached urban areas where crime rates have substantially increased. Consequently, public opinion towards refugees was extremely negative and xenophobic sentiments were on the rise. This has affected all Colombians and made integration more difficult.

Operations

UNHCR's operations in **Colombia** are described in a separate chapter.

In **Costa Rica**, 775 people requested asylum during the year. By the end of 2006, the refugee population amounted to some 11,500. UNHCR's programme focused on the search for durable solutions for refugees. The microcredit programme was nearly doubled, with priority given to women, newly arrived refugees and people with specific needs. Integration into the labour market was promoted by training programmes in small business development and job placement orientation.

Towards the end of the year, the Government began reviewing the recently adopted Immigration Law to amend restrictive measures on refugees. The Government also agreed to re-establish a separate refugee department to strengthen refugee status determination.

Ecuador continues to have the highest number of refugees in Latin America. Throughout the year, more than 7,600 people applied for asylum. In addition to some 11,600 recognized refugees, it is estimated that up to 250,000 people have fled across the border from Colombia.

UNHCR's operations focused on the protection and local integration of refugees and others of concern in border areas and the main urban centres. The capacity of the Ecuadorian Refugee Office was strengthened and the Government has agreed to gradually assume all responsibilities in registration and refugee status determination. Ministerial agreements were adopted to promote access for refugees to the education system and to facilitate the issuance of work permits. At the border, over 40 community-based projects benefited nearly 25,000 people. As lead agency for the Northern Border Inter-Agency Thematic Group, UNHCR coordinated projects implemented by 11 UN agencies in several key areas, such as food security, HIV and AIDS, as well as sexual and reproductive health. The Information and Advice Centre advised asylum-seekers and refugees on the availability of public services and employment opportunities.

In **Panama**, a positive development was recognition of 42 indigenous Colombians as refugees by the National Eligibility Commission, for the first time ever. Nevertheless, the national refugee framework remains inconsistent with international standards, particularly regarding admissibility to the refugee status determination process and the restrictions imposed under the temporary humanitarian protection regime. By the end of the year, Panama hosted some 2,000 people of concern, including long-standing refugee groups from El Salvador and Nicaragua and some 900 Colombians under temporary humanitarian protection. Various indigenous groups crossed the border from Colombia and settled in remote communities of Darién and Kuna-Yala. In coordination with its counterpart in Colombia, UNHCR's office in Panama intensified monitoring and provided basic humanitarian assistance to these people. Water and education projects were implemented to alleviate the burden on underdeveloped host communities and to facilitate local integration.

By the end of 2006, the refugee population in **Peru** stood at some 900, but the number of new arrivals continued to increase in border areas. UNHCR provided technical advice to government counterparts to improve the asylum regime. However, the Special Commission



UNHCR/M.H. Verney

UNHCR staff in Ecuador visit remote communities like Lurimagua to inform Colombians about their right to ask for asylum after fleeing violence in their country.

for Refugees was inactive for parts of the year, mainly because of the electoral process, and the backlog of pending asylum cases increased considerably. Moreover, most asylum-seekers were not issued with documentation in spite of a specific legal provision to that effect. A training and awareness project on human rights and conflict prevention was launched near the border in Iquitos and Tumbes with the Ombudsman's Office and the Catholic Church.

In 2006, the number of Colombians formally seeking asylum in **the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela** increased by 35 per cent. At the same time, the decision-making process of the National Refugee Commission remained slow. Consequently, the backlog of asylum-seekers increased to some 7,800, but only 719 people were recognized as refugees. Many asylum-seekers did not receive temporary documentation, leaving them vulnerable to detention and extortion. In addition, it is estimated that there are some 200,000 Colombians in need of international protection scattered around the country.

UNHCR's response focused on protecting and assisting the majority of people of concern in border areas. More

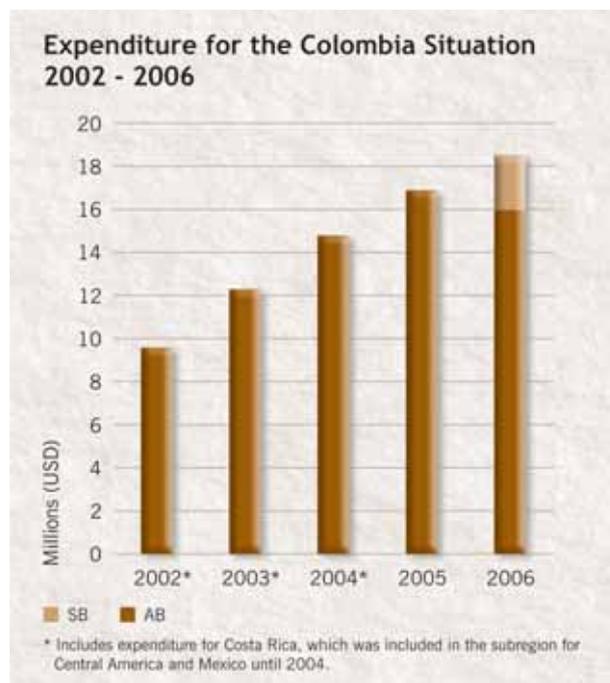
than 40 projects were implemented in the priority fields of education, health and community development. In addition to the support provided to the National Refugee Commission, partnerships were built with other governmental institutions, civil society actors and UN agencies to further develop activities along the border. Within this context, UNHCR continued to implement the Peace and Conflict Prevention Programme, which aims to promote local integration and the rights of refugees.

The **Regional Legal Unit (RLU)** in Costa Rica played an important role in the implementation of the Mexico Plan of Action. UNHCR's priority was to preserve the humanitarian space and to include safeguards for the protection of asylum-seekers and refugees within mixed migratory flows. Specific resolutions on the protection of refugees were reflected in important political and migration forums, such as the Puebla Process and the Iberoamerican Summit. Emphasis was also given to strengthening national asylum bodies and to the reinforcement of regional protection networks. UNHCR's Spanish language website (www.acnur.org) served as a tool for dissemination of refugee information and fund raising, with a 20 per cent increase in the number of users during 2006.

Financial information

As a result of the capping of budgets in 2006, some core protection activities, such as the reinforcement of national registration capacities and the profiling of unregistered Colombians of concern to UNHCR, were not implemented as planned. Community support and local integration programmes in rural areas and microcredit projects for urban refugees were also affected.

UNHCR's regional strategy continued to be encouraged by strong support from the international community. During the past five years, the regional budget has nearly doubled as a result of new activities in border areas, the increased number of asylum-seekers and the Office's involvement with unregistered Colombians of concern to UNHCR. Worthy of particular mention is the support received from local embassies and private donors for capacity building and other operational projects, as well as funding received for inter-agency projects.



Budget and expenditure (USD)

Country	Final budget			Expenditure		
	AB	SB ¹	Total	AB	SB	Total
Colombia	8,146,735	4,112,150	12,258,885	7,268,217	2,543,791	9,812,008
Costa Rica	1,715,953	0	1,715,953	1,505,282	0	1,505,282
Ecuador	3,924,809	0	3,924,809	3,691,502	0	3,691,502
Panama	932,065	0	932,065	816,301	0	816,301
Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)	1,903,555	0	1,903,555	1,709,650	0	1,709,650
Regional activities ²	1,062,366	0	1,062,366	967,098	0	967,098
Total	17,685,482	4,112,150	21,797,632	15,958,050	2,543,791	18,501,842

¹ Does not include a 7 per cent support cost that is recovered from contributions to meet indirect costs for UNHCR.

² Includes care and maintenance and durable solutions to refugees in Northern South America.

Restricted voluntary contributions (USD)

Earmarking	Donor	AB	SB
Northern South America	European Commission	109,744	0
	Japan	300,000	0
	Luxembourg	658,762	0
	Sweden	879,397	0
	United Kingdom	60,518	0
	Sub-total		2,008,420

Earmarking	Donor	AB	SB
Colombia			
	<i>Association française de soutien à l'UNHCR</i>	0	120,919
	Australia for UNHCR	0	74,892
	Canada	51,474	0
	European Commission	2,000,238	637,755
	Netherlands	1,386,000	0
	Norway	31,949	296,625
	Online donations (Headquarters)	604	0
	Private donors in Italy	22,501	0
	Spain	125,628	1,645,967
	Switzerland	393,701	0
	United Kingdom	109,419	0
	United States	2,100,000	123,902
Sub-total		6,221,515	2,900,060
Costa Rica			
	Spain	236,967	0
Sub-total		236,967	0
Ecuador			
	Canada	151,515	0
	European Commission	1,213,710	0
	Germany	310,559	0
	Private donors in Canada	70,000	0
	Private donors in Italy	307,990	0
	Spain	599,721	0
	Switzerland	247,934	0
	UN Trust Fund for Human Security	185,565	0
	United Kingdom	54,697	0
	United States	1,000,000	0
Sub-total		4,141,691	0
Panama			
	Canada	151,515	0
	European Commission	96,735	0
	United States	105,597	0
Sub-total		353,847	0
Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)			
	Canada	151,515	0
	European Commission	241,838	0
Sub-total		393,353	0
Total		13,355,792	2,900,060