

Central America and Mexico

Recent Developments

Over the past three years, UNHCR's presence and role in Mexico has shifted its focus from the provision of international protection to refugees, including support for the local integration of Guatemalan refugees, to broader protection issues. Since March 2002, the Government of Mexico has assumed responsibility for RSD procedures through the *Comisión Mexicana de Ayuda a los Refugiados* (COMAR), with the support of UNHCR. The Government also continues to finance the naturalisation of Guatemalan refugees. In 2003, some 3,000 Guatemalan refugees will receive naturalisation documents, concluding one of the most successful integration processes in Latin America.

In 2002, Costa Rica received the largest number of Colombian refugees in Latin America. The number rose from 3,900 towards the end of 2001, to 6,640 at the end of June 2002. During the first six months

Belize
Costa Rica
El Salvador
Guatemala
Honduras
Mexico
Nicaragua



of 2002, there were 1,840 new arrivals, the majority whom were Colombian. Large numbers of Colombians continue to arrive in Costa Rica, despite the visa restrictions imposed on them in April 2002.

In July 2002, the National Assembly of El Salvador approved the law on RSD which now awaits the signature of the President. This enactment of the law will be an important step towards the institutionalisation of RSD in the region.

Strategic Objectives

In 2003, the Office will advocate the full application of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees by governments in the region. Through increased capacity-building activities for government officials, immigration authorities and the police, UNHCR will promote refugee law, and the establishment of fair and efficient RSD procedures which take

into account the needs of refugee women and children. Local capacities will be strengthened through national protection networks, composed of existing institutions and organisations within civil society, which work with governments and state institutions to provide international protection and humanitarian assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers. UNHCR will also raise support for, and increase awareness of refugee issues worldwide. Support will be provided in the form of information and analysis of current refugee and humanitarian issues, to governments, the private sector, well-known academic institutions, NGOs, personalities and scholars.

Operations

In **Mexico**, the Office will provide training on refugee protection and technical support to COMAR and the National Institute of Migration to support the Government in RSD procedures. This

is geared to ensuring more effective protection for refugees, especially those in urban areas. Awareness raising activities will be undertaken to reinforce the Government's and the public's understanding of refugee issues, as well as to generate political and financial support for UNHCR. The Office will also monitor the naturalisation programme sponsored by the Government of Mexico to ensure that refugee women continue to have full access to their own legal documentation.

In **Guatemala**, following the adoption of refugee law in October 2001 and the establishment of the National Eligibility Committee in 2002, UNHCR will provide training on refugee protection to migration officials and members of the National Eligibility Committee. The Office will also support the Committee in compiling country of origin information and assessing refugee claims. In **El Salvador**, a draft refugee law was approved by the Government in July 2002, and submitted to the National Assembly. Pending the promulgation of the implementing legislation, the Government, with UNHCR's support, will conduct RSD on an ad hoc basis. In **Honduras** and **Nicaragua**, the Office will promote the promulgation of national refugee law

and the adoption of RSD regulations. In **Belize**, UNHCR will pursue efforts to ensure that the eligibility committee resumes its functions.

In **Costa Rica**, UNHCR will provide, through an implementing partner, legal and subsistence assistance to newly arrived asylum-seekers and vulnerable refugees. It is expected that in 2003, the number of refugees, in particular, Colombians, will again rise from the 11,710 refugees recorded at the end of June 2002. The increase of numbers will stretch the limited human and financial resources of the authorities and civil society. The Office will provide training on refugee protection and technical assistance to the National Eligibility Committee, to ensure that legal mechanisms are in place to protect and assist asylum-seekers and refugees.

In 2002, UNHCR and the University of Costa Rica jointly carried out an evaluation of the process of integration of refugees in the country. The results of this evaluation will guide UNHCR's efforts to find better ways to integrate refugees in the coming years, and will also serve as a guide for the integration of refugees in other areas in the region.



Mexico: One of the most successful integration processes in Latin America: former refugees are granted land titles at a ceremony in Maya Balam, Quitana Roo. UNHCR / M. Enchandi

As a result of this evaluation, refugees will be encouraged to become more involved in micro-credit projects, which will further promote their self-reliance.

UNHCR will try to expedite the granting of residency and naturalisation documents to long-staying refugees in the region (the majority of whom are Central American). In 2002, the Government of Mexico naturalised 50 long-staying Central American refugees. In 2003, UNHCR will continue to advocate the naturalisation of some 3,500 refugees living in urban areas.

UNHCR will support national protection networks, through which members of civil society involved in human rights, migration, social assistance and related issues will assist individuals seeking asylum. Part of these efforts will include providing orientation and assistance during the processing of their cases. UNHCR will work on advocacy and awareness raising for refugees through public information campaigns.

In the context of stricter controls for migration in border areas, UNHCR will ensure that asylum-seekers have access to RSD procedures. In its role as an observer, UNHCR will address refugee rights and their protection, within the framework of the Regional Conference on Migration (the Puebla Process). In this respect, UNHCR will promote the principle of *non-refoulement* and the right to seek asylum.

The Regional Legal Unit, based in Costa Rica, will provide technical support and legal advice for the implementation of protection and solutions strategies in the Americas. It will promote and disseminate refugee law and enhance co-operation with the organs of the Inter-American system as a means to further strengthen the link between human rights and refugee protection.

Budget (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme
Costa Rica	1,418,433
Mexico	1,997,559
Regional Activities ¹	1,564,900
Total	4,980,892

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