

Central America and Mexico

Major developments

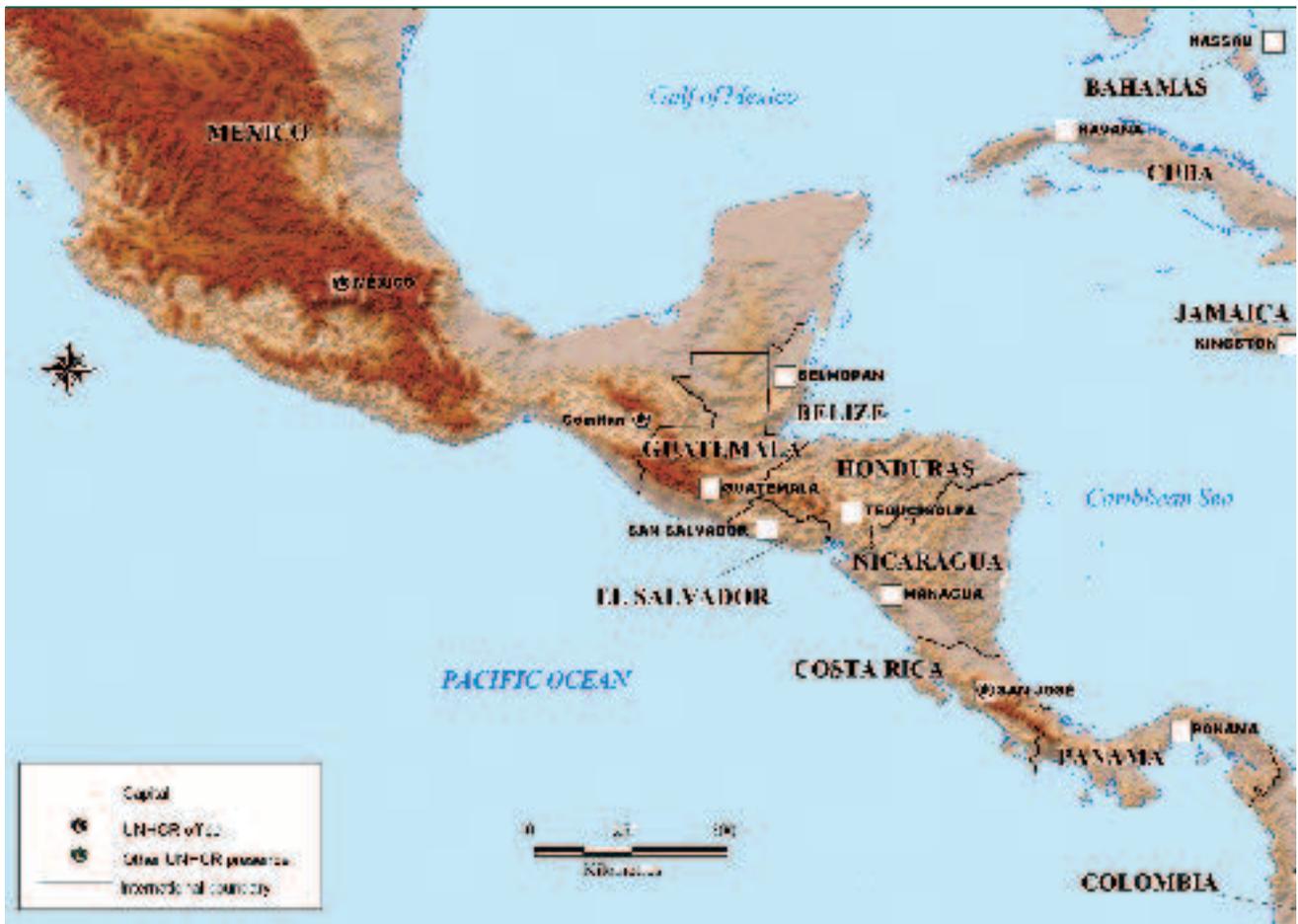
The restrictive migratory measures implemented after 11 September 2001 continued to affect Central America and Mexico in 2002. In Costa Rica and El Salvador, visa restrictions were introduced for Colombians in April 2002. UNHCR continued to stress the need to find the right balance between applying security measures against terrorism, and providing protection to refugees and asylum-seekers in the region.

In Central America and Mexico, there were some 27,770 persons of concern to UNHCR, and around 4,210 new asylum applications. Costa Rica received the largest number of asylum-seekers in the region, of whom 2,355 were recognised (97 per cent of them Colombians).

Challenges and concerns

In 2002, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua underwent difficult political and eco-

Belize
Costa Rica
El Salvador
Guatemala
Honduras
Mexico
Nicaragua



conomic times, which were further heightened by a series of natural disasters. The excessively rapid turnover of government officials responsible for immigration and refugee issues clearly impeded or delayed the achievement of UNHCR's initial goals or planned activities in the region on numerous occasions.

UNHCR faced four major challenges in the region: 1) strengthening the capacity of governmental and non-governmental institutions, especially those dealing with migration issues, through the development of protection networks; 2) promoting durable solutions for long-staying refugees through naturalisation or the regularisation of their migratory status, as well as encouraging self-reliance for urban and rural refugees; 3) providing support to government authorities, through the field offices and the Regional Legal Unit, to reinforce the legal framework for the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers; and 4) implementing gender mainstreaming in all sectors and levels of UNHCR's activities in the region.

Progress towards solutions

UNHCR, through its Refugee Status Determination (RSD) project, significantly contributed to speeding up the asylum procedures in Costa Rica, and to clearing the backlog of some 2,000 asylum claims at the beginning of the year. The Office facilitated a co-operation agreement between the University of Costa Rica and the Immigration Institute, which allowed law students to assist with the RSD process as part of their course work; this arrangement contributed to the sustainability of the RSD process.

The Regional Legal Unit, based in Costa Rica, continued to play a valuable role, providing legal services for all the offices in the Americas. The Unit strove to further strengthen the legal regime for the protection of refugees, asylum-seekers and other persons of concern. Action undertaken included: strategic alliances with the Inter-American System; the application of human rights norms and standards to refugee protection; and the consolidation of an electronic institutional memory (through the website in Spanish) to aid the promotion and dis-

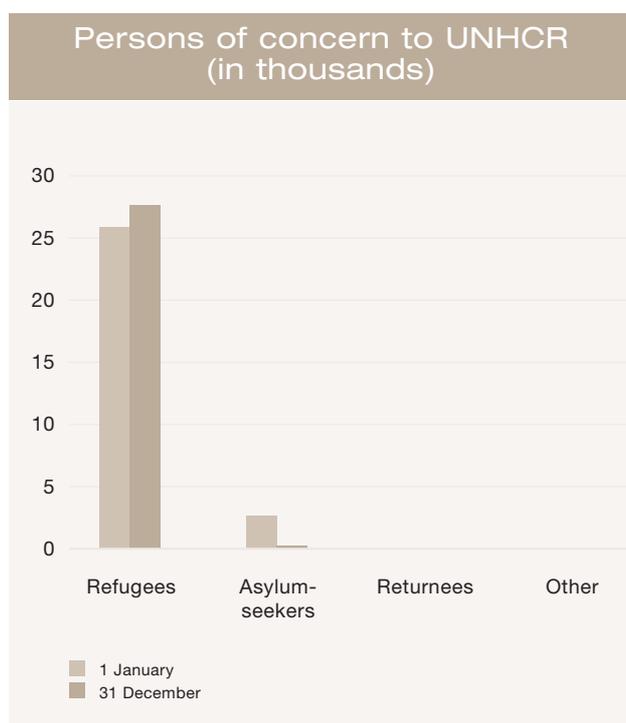
semination of refugee law. At the end of 2002, there were 31,000 visitors to the website each month.

The Eligibility Commission was established in Guatemala in July 2002, after a series of meetings and negotiations with the authorities. The Office continued to lobby for the adoption of a decree granting permanent residence status to long-staying refugees, and exempting them from related administrative costs. In El Salvador, the Law for the Determination of Refugee Status was enacted by Parliament in August 2002. During the year, UNHCR also financed the publication in Spanish of the texts of the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol to raise the awareness of pertinent authorities and the public on refugee issues. In Honduras, the Office continued to carry out RSD under an ad hoc procedure. UNHCR's implementing partner was invited to participate in the eligibility interviews, and the Office was consulted on all rejected cases.

The Government of Mexico formally took over the RSD process from UNHCR, and established an Eligibility Commission on 18 March 2002, some 18 months after Mexico had acceded to the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol. The Government also created a Working Group within the Mexican Commission for Attention to Refugees (COMAR), to review cases and make recommendations to the Commission.

Operations

UNHCR gave training on refugee law and RSD to migration officers, border police and new government officials responsible for RSD. In Guatemala, 764 officials (201 women) benefited from 15 training sessions on "Refugee Rights and the International Protection of Refugees and Migrants." In Nicaragua, refugee law courses were included in the international law curriculum of the National University as



a result of UNHCR's efforts. In El Salvador, 70 students of law, journalism and foreign affairs (45 of them women) participated in six seminars on the principles of refugee protection.

UNHCR continued to support and promote protection networks in the region. The annual meeting of the regional network was held in Guatemala, bringing together some 23 institutions. Discussions included the presentation of cases before the Inter-

American System of human rights, trends in forced migration, and the adverse impact of 11 September 2001 on migratory policy in the region.

Migration issues continued to be at the forefront of all government agendas in the region. UNHCR continued to participate actively in the Regional Conference on Migration (the Puebla Process), and as a result, refugee issues were included in the final Plan of Action.



Mexico: Former Guatemalan refugees in Quintana Roo region. *UNHCR / M. Echandi*

During the year, the UNHCR office in Costa Rica contributed to updating the guidelines on SGBV, through the organisation of a regional workshop, which included the participation of civil society, government institutions, academia, and representatives of refugees, returnees and IDPs (women and men).

In 2002, the Office continued to carry out public awareness activities throughout the region. The Education for Peace Programme carried out 56 activities throughout the year, attended by some 1,300 persons, mostly school and university students. UNHCR signed an agreement with Amnesty International on the supervision of the Education for Peace Programme in June 2002. The upgrading of UNHCR's Spanish website was finalised to mirror the English version, and launched in March 2002. More than 2,000 documents are available online, including more than 200 documents translated for posting on the Spanish website.

In **Belize**, members of various religious and ethnic communities provided assistance to 14 asylum-seekers awaiting determination of their refugee status.

In 2002, **Costa Rica** received some 3,790 new asylum-seekers. Some 256 persons also arrived in Costa Rica under family reunification. UNHCR provided assistance to vulnerable asylum-seekers and provided health services to some 60 persons per month. To facilitate local integration and self-reliance, UNHCR created a micro-credit scheme in November 2002 (for projects such as motorcycle repair workshops, beauty parlours, bakeries, internet cafés, advertisement agencies and handicrafts workshops) which benefited some 13 refugee families. The credit ceiling for any enterprise was set at USD 1,300.

In **El Salvador**, there were eight new arrivals, and 20 Colombian refugees (nine of them women) were assisted throughout the year with lodging and a subsistence allowance, as they lacked legal documentation and work permits.

Mexico received 260 new asylum-seekers. UNHCR assisted more than 10,000 refugees and asylum-seekers (food, lodging, education and legal support). In 2002, the Government of Mexico gave 72 urban refugees and 1,521 Guatemalan refugees their naturalisation cards, through a programme financed by

the Government. Some 3,400 Guatemalan refugees are still awaiting naturalisation (2,500 of them are expected to receive citizenship in 2003). In the State of Campeche, the Government granted legal title to land to 2,788 ex-Guatemalan refugees. In the State of Chiapas, UNHCR activities included funding for 20 credit associations with a total of 580 members (273 women). 573 projects were funded, of which 220 were in agriculture, 143 in livestock and 210 in the commercial sector. As a result of these credit activities, beneficiaries doubled, and sometimes even quadrupled, their income.

During 2002, in **Guatemala**, there were 40 new asylum-seekers, **Honduras** received 75 new asylum cases, and **Nicaragua** received 22 new arrivals. As part of the protection network, UNHCR, local organisations and churches assisted asylum-seekers, providing food and lodging.

Funding

Due to the budgetary constraints, some of UNHCR's key dissemination and training activities had to be cancelled in 2002. These included: the regional annual gender meeting; the regional gender awareness training in Mexico; and the first International Refugee Law Course, which was planned for 30 governmental officials from all over Latin America. UNHCR also had to postpone a human rights workshop for NGOs on the importance of documenting refugee cases for the Inter-American System, as well as the publication of a comparative study on nationality and statelessness in the Americas. Furthermore, a meeting of experts on asylum in Costa Rica had to be indefinitely postponed.

Voluntary Contributions – Restricted / Earmarked (USD)

Earmarking ¹	Donor	Annual Programme Budget	
		Income	Contribution
Mexico			
	<i>España con ACNUR (SPA)</i>	90,854	79,708
Central America			
	Sweden	282,754	282,754
	United States of America	1,140,000	1,140,000
Total		1,513,608	1,502,462

¹ For more information on the various earmarkings, please refer to the Donor Profiles.

Budget and Expenditure (USD)

Country	Revised Budget	Expenditure
	Annual Programme Budget	
Costa Rica	1,340,179	1,212,685
Mexico	1,838,353	1,792,502
Regional Projects ¹	1,874,200	1,452,537
Total	5,052,732	4,457,724

¹ Includes activities in Belize, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua, the promotion of refugee law, and gender-mainstreaming. It also includes scholarships for refugee students.