

# Central America and Mexico

## Major developments

During 2003, Central America and Mexico continued to receive asylum-seekers from the subregion and from further afield. Many arrived within mixed flows of undocumented migrants. Although countries in the region remained generally receptive to persons in need of international protection, restrictive migratory and security concerns posed challenges for asylum-seekers attempting to gain access to territories.

## Challenges and concerns

In 2003, a major challenge for UNHCR remained the identification of asylum-seekers amongst mixed flows of migrants, and ensuring alternatives to detention.

Shortcomings in the consolidation of national asylum procedures, the application of refugee instruments, or in local knowledge or experience led UNHCR to conduct formal and informal training on refugee law. The Office also provided legal advice and/or information on a routine basis to government officials to ensure that RSD procedures met international protection standards.

Belize

Costa Rica

El Salvador

Guatemala

Honduras

Mexico

Nicaragua

With the notable exception of the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance's (COMAR) office in Tapachula on the southern Mexican border, refugee offices and staff throughout the region were concentrated in capital cities with a limited presence at border entry points. The scaling down of UNHCR's presence in the region constituted an additional challenge to the Office, since it could not maintain a regular presence at entry points to provide the protection needed for refugees and other persons of concern.

Costa Rica received the largest number of refugees in the subregion: some 13,508 persons, of whom more than 60 per cent (8,266) were Colombians. The Government granted refugee status to some 1,838 persons, with Colombian nationals continuing to represent the majority of new applicants and new recognitions (92 and 90 per cent, respectively). In 2003, the Costa Rican Government maintained a high rate of recognition at first instance for new applications (69 per cent), and all cases were adjudicated within the mandatory time limit of 30 days.

In Costa Rica, the local integration of urban refugees, mostly Colombians from among the educated urban middle class, with relatively few from rural areas, was hampered by economic and social factors. The already high unemployment and underemployment in the country prevented many refugees from finding gainful employment. Many potential

employers were unfamiliar with the refugee identification card, and were reluctant to hire individuals who did not hold residency papers. Refugees with trade or professional backgrounds also had difficulty in obtaining recognition of their past experience as they lacked papers proving their academic or professional qualifications.

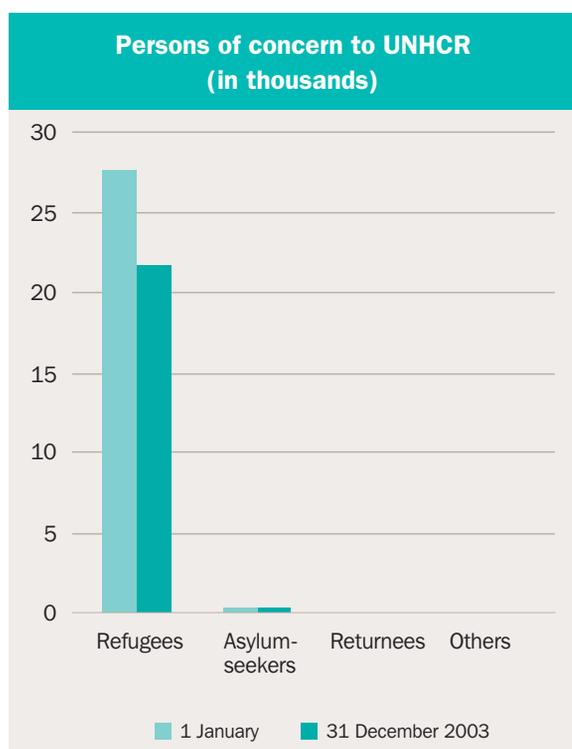
UNHCR established a modest resettlement programme to provide an alternative for refugees for whom other durable solutions were not found. The Office processed 162 cases for resettlement, mainly to the USA.

In Belize, the main constraint to refugee protection was the lack of a functioning asylum procedure and the continued treatment of asylum-seekers as economic migrants.

## Operations and progress towards solutions

In Central America, UNHCR participated in RSD procedures in **Guatemala**, and through implementing partners, in **El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua**. In **Belize**, UNHCR lobbied the Government for the re-establishment of a national RSD procedure. The Office also implemented assistance programmes to help newly recognized refugees achieve self-sufficiency throughout the region. Most refugees were able to integrate easily, due to cultural and linguistic similarities with the host communities. The main challenge to local integration remained the prevailing economic situation in the countries. During the year, however, UNHCR facilitated local integration by supporting income-generating activities, including the development of a micro-credit project.

The Regional Legal Unit, which is based in **Costa Rica** and serves all UNHCR offices in the Americas, upgraded its Spanish website, **www.acnur.org**. New sections were launched, including a country of origin database focusing on Colombia. The number of one-time users per month increased from 31,000 in January to 56,000 by December 2003. The total number of "hits" also increased over the course of the year, from 600,000 in January to 800,000 in December 2003. The Regional Legal Unit organized a Regional Latin American Course on International Refugee Law. This was attended by 30 government officials in charge of refugee policy and RSD procedures in countries in the region.





Mexico: Colombian refugee children enjoying art and craft activities. *UNHCR/G. Jiménez*

In Costa Rica, UNHCR signed a cooperation agreement with the University of Costa Rica which allowed university students to participate in refugee-related work. As a result of this joint effort, the Office was able to propose key refugee protection provisions to drafts of a law on migration and a decree on RSD, leading to an improved system of refugee protection.

UNHCR also focused its assistance activities on the promotion of durable solutions, with particular emphasis on local integration and resettlement for a growing and potentially long-staying refugee population. During the year, the Office implemented a micro-credit project which provided urban refugees with access to loans for productive projects. Credits were extended in 90 instances with an average of USD 1,000 per loan. An agreement was also concluded with the Ministry of Labour to develop occupational training for urban refugees, and to keep

employers more fully informed of the labour rights of refugees.

For the first time in Guatemala, the Eligibility Committee adjudicated asylum claims and adopted a resolution whereby long-staying refugees were entitled to apply for permanent residence. In Honduras, a law on migration was enacted at the end of the year which contained provisions on refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless persons. UNHCR provided technical advice for the drafting process. In Nicaragua, UNHCR provided financial assistance to the Government to carry out a census to identify long-staying refugees, as a first step to granting them permanent status.

In Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua, lodging and food were provided to all recognized refugees during the initial period of integration. UNHCR made small contributions to church

shelters or migrant houses to enable them to improve their infrastructure and/or offer shelter and care to asylum-seekers and refugees at no cost. In these countries, refugees' health care needs were normally met by national institutions, often free of charge, but those needs that could not be met (including medicines) were covered under UNHCR's programmes. A one-time financial contribution was made to the university hospital in Nicaragua to purchase surgical and medical equipment, so that they could continue to provide health care to asylum-seekers and refugees.

A number of public information activities took place in Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua. These were aimed at raising awareness of asylum and refugee-related issues. In Costa Rica, as part of the World Refugee Day (WRD) activities, UNHCR organized a round table seminar on refugee issues with the support of the University of Costa Rica. Other events included the presentation of the results of the "Second Local Integration Survey of Colombian Refugees," and the official inauguration of the "Sergio Vieira de Mello" human rights course at the University of Costa Rica.

In Mexico, UNHCR provided on-the-job and formal training on refugee law, as well as legal advice to COMAR officials. The Office facilitated a cooperative exchange between Mexican and Canadian refugee officials, which included several visits by Mexican refugee officials to Canada to observe the functioning of the Canadian Immigration and Refugee Board (IRB), and the visit of two IRB officials to Mexico to conduct a workshop, and to give on-the-job training on procedural issues, as well as on the interpretation of the refugee definition.

In 2003, COMAR established a new office in Tapachula, along the southern border with Guatemala. UNHCR also transferred its existing sub-office in Comitán to Tapachula. The new presence of COMAR and UNHCR in Tapachula allowed for more effective identification of and attention to asylum-seekers passing through the busiest border point in the region. UNHCR, in coordination with COMAR, trained migration officials, officials of the National Human Rights Commission (CNDH), and NGOs along the northern and southern borders on refugee protection. These activities helped UNHCR expand and strengthen the national protection networks,

including an association of NGOs, and governmental and academic institutions dedicated to protecting refugees. UNHCR's sub-office in Tapachula also implemented activities to strengthen the network of human rights commissions, NGOs, religious organizations, academics, and migrant houses in the four southern states of Mexico.

In October, UNHCR organised the fourth Annual Regional Protection Network meeting which was attended by NGOs, human rights lawyers, academics, and religious organizations engaged in the protection and advocacy of refugees and asylum-seekers. The participants were trained on refugee protection issues, and at the end of the meeting, they adopted a one-year regional plan of action to support UNHCR's objectives in five main areas: training, inter-institutional coordination, advocacy, public information, and developing legal frameworks.

Material assistance was provided to new arrivals, as well as to elderly and vulnerable refugees. The Office discontinued material assistance to non-vulnerable long-staying refugees, to encourage them to become more self-sufficient. To further this, UNHCR developed a new micro-credit programme and assisted refugees in identifying employment. The Office's implementing partner continued to strengthen its ties to national institutions to improve access to social services for urban refugees.

In addition to the commemoration of WRD, several public awareness activities were carried out in Mexico, including 10 conferences on international refugee law and UNHCR's work, and five photo exhibitions on refugees in different parts of the country. The Office also participated in several UN inter-agency activities, and disseminated information on refugees at the international book fairs in Mexico City and Guadalajara. A total of 60 media activities were carried out throughout the year. The Education for Peace programme, which promotes peace education for refugees, reached out to nearly 1,200 persons, mostly students.

## Funding

In 2003, the budgets allocated to Central American countries constituted the minimum requirements to cover the basic needs of refugees. In El Salvador, an increased number of Colombians and other vulnerable refugees led UNHCR to increase the original budget allocation, to ensure that their needs were met.

In Mexico, the funds allocated were sufficient to cover assistance, protection, training/capacity building, durable solutions and public information activities. In Costa Rica, UNHCR was able to adjust activities within the budget to meet the needs of refugees and persons of concern to UNHCR. However, it became evident at the end of the year that more financial support was needed for resettlement activities.

Voluntary contributions - Restricted / Earmarked (USD)			
Earmarking <sup>1</sup>	Donor	Annual programme budget	
		Income	Contribution
Central America			
	Sweden	228,050	228,050
Costa Rica			
	United States of America	200,000	200,000
Mexico			
	<i>España con ACNUR (SPA)</i>	4,420	0
<b>Total</b>		<b>432,470</b>	<b>428,050</b>

<sup>1</sup> 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	1,489,321	1,363,495
Mexico	1,908,251	1,842,279
Regional projects <sup>1</sup>	1,188,453	1,137,122
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,586,025</b>	<b>4,342,896</b>

<sup>1</sup> Includes material assistance to refugees in Mexico and Central America, promotion of refugee law, strengthening of national capacities and public awareness, as well as scholarships for refugee students.