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Resettlement involves the selection and movement of refugees from a first asylum State to a third State that has agreed to admit and protect them, on the basis of long-term or permanent residence status. It is one of the three “classic” durable solutions for refugees, alongside voluntary repatriation and local integration.

In the first decades of UNHCR’s work, resettlement was used extensively as a durable solution for European refugees following the Second World War. In later years, however, voluntary repatriation came to be the preferred durable solution, with resettlement being used in a more limited way as a tool to protect smaller number of refugees.

There are exceptions. In the 1980s, tens of thousands of Indo-Chinese refugees were resettled to countries outside of Asia, in a remarkable demonstration of solidarity by the international community. But the fact remained that resettlement’s full potential not only as a tool of international protection and responsibility sharing, but also as a durable solution for larger numbers of refugees, remained largely unexploited.

It is only relatively recently that interest has revived in resettlement. The main impetus comes from the fact that more and more refugees have become locked in extended exile, with no prospect for voluntary repatriation or local integration. At the same time, host States, concerned about the burdens of hosting refugees and lack of international solidarity, have been closing their borders.

UNHCR used commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention as the occasion to launch consultations with States aimed to identify ways to revitalize the protection regime set in place by the Convention, while also exploring ways to complement it with new approaches. These consultations generated the Agenda for Protection, which was endorsed by UNHCR’s Executive Committee in 2002 and later welcomed by the United Nations General Assembly.

The Agenda calls for resettlement to be used more strategically as a tool of burden and responsibility sharing, preferably in tandem with other durable solutions. UNHCR is specifically requested to expand the number of countries engaged in resettlement, so as to ensure it is to the benefit of as many refugees as possible.

The process of consultations also recognized that resettlement produces secondary benefits, other than those to the resettled refugee. For example, it can sustain first asylum in the face of continued flows of refugees, by serving a burden-sharing function. Furthermore, successful resettlement programmes can engender support for a government’s asylum policies among the general public.

UNHCR is therefore actively pursuing the “strategic use of resettlement” so that these secondary benefits are not only planned, but also maximized. The vehicle for doing so in Latin America is the Mexico Plan of Action, which is an innovative and visionary approach to strengthening international protection of refugees and increasing the availability of durable solutions – including resettlement – across the board. The “Solidarity Resettlement” programme is one of the main pillars of the Plan of Action. It is an expression of the commitment of Latin American countries to resettle refugees arriving in first asylum countries in the region, in a sign of regional solidarity and burden and responsibility sharing and is already helping to sustain first asylum in the face of continued flows of refugees.

In line with UNHCR’s global objectives, we trust that implementation of Solidarity Resettlement will enable UNHCR to increase the number of States in Latin America with resettlement programmes, give proof of the commitment of States in the region to share burdens and responsibilities with their neighbours, while encouraging States to continue to provide protection in the region, notably to Colombian refugees.

Erika Feller
Assistant High Commissioner for Protection
Resettlement in the Americas

A traditional solution paves the way ahead for refugee protection in the region

Resettlement: a traditional tool for protection

UNHCR defines resettlement as the “selection and transfer of refugees from a state in which they have sought protection to a third state which has agreed to admit them – as refugees – with permanent residence status”. Although the concept was not clearly spelt out until the mid 1960’s, resettlement was always used by international refugee organisations as a tool for protection.

The International Refugee Organisation (IRO), UNHCR’s predecessor set up in 1945 to protect the 21 million refugees scattered across Europe in the aftermath of the Second World War, resettled more than one million people between 1947 and 1951. By comparison, only 73,000 refugees chose to repatriate to their country of birth. One of the resettlement criteria used by IRO was that refugees should have “valid objections” to repatriation, including “persecution, or fear of persecution, because of race, religion, nationality or political opinions”.

Today, resettlement is one of UNHCR’s three main solutions to refugee problems worldwide and is especially useful when the two preferred solutions, voluntary repatriation or local integration, are not applicable. Resettlement has never been – and can never be - a solution for the majority of refugees but it plays a crucial role for a small percentage of refugees with very specific needs.

First and foremost, resettlement is used when the physical safety of refugees is still at risk in the country of first asylum – either because there is a risk of refoulement or because the asylum country is unable to offer protection. Other groups of refugees who can be considered for resettlement are those with specific medical needs, survivors of extreme violence or torture, women at risk and children or adolescents. Lack of prospect of either local integration or voluntary repatriation is another key element when deciding to pursue the option of resettlement.

Unlike asylum and voluntary repatriation, resettlement is not a right. While States signatories to the 1951 Geneva Convention are obliged to protect asylum seekers and refugees who first arrive on their territory; no such obligation exists to accept refugees for resettlement. Until recently, only a very few countries in the world ran annual resettlement programmes: in this respect, the Americas region has always played a very important role.

Of the 9.2 million refugees under UNHCR’s mandate in 2004, some 84,000 people were resettled. The majority of them (over 52,000) went to the United States, which has offered thousands of refugees over the years the chance to

Colombian refugee on her last day in Lago Agrio, Ecuador, before departing for resettlement in a third country.
start a new life on American soil. Australia was the second biggest resettlement country in 2004, followed by Canada. Other traditional resettlement countries include Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark, as well as New Zealand, the United Kingdom and Ireland among others.

In more recent years, a number of new resettlement countries have emerged, many of them in Latin America where Chile was the first to start an annual programme. Today refugees from as far away as Afghanistan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Sudan live in Chile and Mexico, as well as in Argentina and Brazil.

**The Mexico Plan of Action**

If both North and South America have done a lot over the years to help refugees, Latin America unfortunately remains a region that continues to produce refugees in large numbers. Every year, thousands of people flee the conflict in Colombia to take refuge in other countries in the region – there are an estimated half a million Colombians of concern to UNHCR in Ecuador, Venezuela, Costa Rica and Panama.

Neighbouring Ecuador and Venezuela are bearing the brunt of the outflow. An estimated quarter of a million Colombians are in need of UNHCR’s offices in Ecuador, while in Venezuela the number is around 200,000. In late 2004, twenty Latin American countries adopted the Mexico Plan of Action, a broad programme of action to help refugees and displaced persons in Latin America.

Based on the principle of regional solidarity, the plan focuses on three main areas of intervention: solidarity within cities, where many refugees and displaced persons live, solidarity in border areas for both refugees and receiving communities, and a regional resettlement programme to help countries with large numbers of Colombian refugees. This last option is a crucial part of the Plan, recognising that while local integration is always the preferred solution, there are times when resettlement is the only option.

In April of last year, three men banged on the door of Carlos’ house in Lago Agrio, a small Ecuadorian town located just a few kilometres away from the border with Colombia. Carlos had been recognised as a refugee in Ecuador in 2003, after it was established he suffered from a valid fear of persecution from one of Colombia’s irregular armed groups.

Carlos was doing his best to get on with his new life as a refugee: a member of the communal bank set up with the help of UNHCR in Lago Agrio, he was running a small business selling snacks outside the main school. But crossing the border had not been enough: since arriving in Ecuador, Carlos and his son had received more threats from the same armed group that had forced them to flee.

On that night of April 2005, both father and son managed to escape just in time before the men were able to kick down the front door. The intruders, who were armed with guns and said they came from the Colombian department of Putumayo, threatened to return and kill the women of the house if they couldn’t find the men. In a state of complete panic, the family was immediately put under police protection and evacuated to Quito, from where they were later resettled to Brazil.

Brazil has been playing a leading role right from the start of the Mexico Plan of Action. As well as offering resettlement places for many Colombian refugees, it has now set up a system of emergency referral for people like Carlos who find themselves in grave danger and need urgent removal. Chile and Argentina have also signed resettlement agreements with UNHCR and today Costa Rica and Ecuador are increasingly referring a greater number of resettlement cases to countries within the region.

In order to capitalize on the early success of the Mexico Plan of Action, UNHCR organised a meeting earlier this year in Quito to review the achievements of the resettlement programme and to encourage more countries to adopt concrete measures for its implementation. The meeting, attended by eight Latin American countries as well as Canada, Norway, Sweden and the United States, aimed primarily at strengthening the spirit of cooperation within the region. It also provided a platform for Latin American nations to exchange ideas with other countries that have a longer experience of resettlement.

“This North-South dialogue is extremely important,” said Philippe Lavanchy, Director of UNHCR’s bureau for the Americas. “While the focus of the Mexico Plan of Action is very much on regional solidarity, the help of States outside the region remains crucial. One of the outcomes of the Quito meeting was to set up twinning agreements between emerging and traditional resettlement countries in order to share the expertise that already exists.”
The way ahead: Challenges and opportunities

All participants at the meeting were in agreement that integration is key to the long-term success of any resettlement programme - and it is perhaps in this respect that Latin American nations have the most to learn from traditional resettlement countries. The majority of Colombian refugees today are still resettled to Europe or northern America, in countries that have a long experience of running programmes designed to help highly vulnerable refugees integrate in their new surroundings.

For years, Gloria had suffered physical violence at the hands of her husband, whom she had long suspected of belonging to one of Colombia’s irregular armed groups. She had always worried about the safety of her three sons and in late 2003 her worst nightmare seemed to become reality when her eldest child, who was 18 at the time, disappeared after receiving threats from an armed group. Fearing for her life and that of her two younger sons, Gloria fled across the border.

Once in Ecuador, Gloria became part of the hidden mass of Colombian people who are potentially of concern to UNHCR but are too scared, traumatised or simply unaware of their rights to approach the office. She had been in Lago Agrio for a year before the local church informed UNHCR of the squalid conditions in which she and her two young sons lived, in a poor squatters’ community that had sprung up just outside town.

The UNHCR assistant-protection officer was in for a shock when she went to visit and found mother and sons living in a shack under plastic sheeting, with no access to any basic services, including running water. Gloria, in a state of near-total psychological collapse, was relying almost entirely on her 13-year old son to keep the family going.

After several months of psychological treatment, it became clear that Gloria still feared for her safety and that she would not be able to function while remaining in Ecuador. Accepted for resettlement by Sweden, she was reluctant to leave until she knew what had happened to her elder son. UNHCR teams on both sides of the border worked to find the boy, who one day telephoned his mother to let her know he was safe. Gloria and her two youngest were resettled in November to Sweden, where they hope the older son will soon be able to join them.

“We are very well and very happy,” the family’s 13-year old wrote to UNHCR at Christmas time. “We are in a very nice city, full of lights and decoration. The people here are very nice and we have met many people who speak Spanish. My mother is well.”

Starting life in a new country is never easy and can be especially difficult for resettled refugees, who have to go through the process twice. In Sweden, people like Gloria and her family are put in contact with other Colombian refugees and are offered language and professional skills training. In Latin America, integration is proving a challenge, with Brazil, Chile and Argentina all reporting some early difficulties, often linked to limited resources but also to refugees’ expectations.

In some instances, however, slight adjustments might be all that is needed to make a great deal of difference. At
the moment, resettlement programmes in the region tend to focus almost exclusively on the cities yet the majority of refugees resettled within Latin America come from rural regions of Colombia. One possible way of helping their integration may be to offer them support within rural areas instead.

Resettlement can be fraught with difficulties, for receiving nations and refugees alike. The hope of being resettled to a richer country like the United States can at times skew refugees’ expectations and in some cases creates a “pull” factor that is difficult to manage. Nevertheless, resettlement remains what it has always been for UNHCR and its predecessors: a very important tool for refugee protection. When all works well, resettlement can be an enriching experience for all, including the host country, which can greatly benefit from the cultural wealth diverse refugee communities bring with them.

By Marie-Helene Verney in Bogota
Solidarity Resettlement in Action: The Quito Meeting, 2-3 February 2006

How to ensure the sustainability of the Resettlement Programme in Latin America?

Representatives of Governments and NGOs of eight different countries in Latin America (1), as well as Canada, the United States, Norway, Sweden and IOM, joined efforts with UNHCR last 2-3 February in Quito to look for responses to this question.

Solidarity Resettlement is the programme adopted by some Latin American countries through which they receive resettled refugees coming from the countries hosting the largest numbers of refugees in the region, namely Costa Rica and Ecuador. This project is framed within the Mexico Plan of Action and advances a new approach on the strategic use of resettlement, based on the principles of international solidarity and responsibility-sharing between the main countries receiving refugees and the rest of countries in the region.

The Quito Meeting reiterated the commitments of the Mexico Plan of Action through a special appeal to all countries that adopted it to translate their words into actions. In response, the main emerging resettlement countries, Argentina, Brazil, and Chile, generously announced an increase in their resettlement quotas. Also, two other countries, Mexico and Uruguay, announced their intention to consider becoming part of the programme.

The Meeting acknowledged that the local integration of resettled refugees is one of the major challenges for the emerging resettlement countries and, in general, a challenge to the overall sustainability of the Solidarity Resettlement programme in the region. Refugees are the primary actors in the integration process. However, the challenges they face in this process respond in large part to the socio-economic conditions in the receiving society. Therefore, the integration of resettled refugees into the emerging resettlement countries presupposes a distinct approach from that of the traditional resettlement countries and it requires extraordinary efforts to attain their integration, not only on the part of the refugees themselves, but also of the societies in the receiving countries.

In this context, several countries voiced their concern with regard to the refugees’ expectations of the resettlement countries, which sometimes do not match reality, causing difficulties for their local integration. Often the conditions in the emerging resettlement countries are different from those in countries with a long-standing resettlement tradition. When this is the case, it is fundamental to sustainable resettlement that the refugees have realistic expectations about their country of destination, as well as a genuine intention to integrate into their new societies. To this respect, the Meeting underlined the importance of efforts to strengthen pre-departure counseling and orientation programmes for refugees, as well as to provide them with objective information on the actual conditions of the resettlement country to enable all refugees to make an informed decision regarding their future.

As to the reception and integration programmes in emerging resettlement countries, the Meeting recommended the use and adaptation of existing national programmes, instead of the establishment of parallel structures in order to make the programmes more feasible and sustainable. Similarly, the Meeting recommended expanding resettlement into rural areas, since there is evidence that broader categories of refugees attain integration with less difficulty there. Many voices, particularly those from the civil society, stressed the need to avoid establishing dependency while accompanying resettled refugees throughout all phases of resettlement, enhancing their self-sufficiency. Thus, the Meeting underscored one of the fundamental requirements to attain a durable solution for the refugees: refugees should see themselves as active agents contributing to the development of the receiving society; a vision receiving societies should embrace as well, not only as a matter of rhetoric but also in practice.

There was also unanimous agreement on the need for international support to ensure the feasibility of the programme through concrete technical and financial contributions throughout all stages of the resettlement cycle of every refugee. Traditional resettlement countries responded with clear declarations of support to the programme as such, and offered technical and economic cooperation for concrete projects, at the same time expressing their interest in receiving concrete proposals. Emerging resettlement countries in turn expressed their commitment to increasing their own contribution as resources allow.

Other actions beyond financial contributions were also recommended, requiring coordination and a common vision between emerging and traditional countries of resettlement. For instance, all resettlement countries may adopt more flexible criteria in accepting refugees with specific profiles in their programmes, thus ensuring a greater

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1 Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Uruguay, Venezuela
complementarity between the pro-
grammes of emerging and traditional
resettlement countries.

Finally, there was consensus on
the need to support first countries of
asylum, particularly Costa Rica and
Ecuador, in strengthening the local
integration of refugees. This issue was
raised to a large extent to preserve the
primary role of resettlement as a protec-
tion tool, while preventing resettlement
programmes from replacing the actions
States should undertake to enhance the
refugees’ prospects for local integration.

The voices of support and of com-
mmitment to the Resettlement Pro-
gramme injected a new impetus to
this component of the Mexico Plan of
Action. But the most difficult part is yet
to be done: translating this construc-
tive spirit in concrete projects. Through
the adoption of a plan to implement
the recommendations resulting from
Quito, UNHCR will fulfill its commitment
and support to Solidarity Resettlement
which, as was emphasized in the Quito
Meeting, will only be achieved through
a collaborative approach of refugees,
receiving societies, and the international
community.

By Belén García de Vinuesa
Senior Protection Officer
UNHCR’s Bureau for the Americas
Resettlement in Costa Rica: An experience in evolution

With the surprising increase in the arrival of Colombian refugees to Costa Rica, as of the year 2000, the country initiated a new stage in its attention to this new population of refugees. With different necessities and profiles - as compared to the previous Central American refugees in the 80s-, the first challenges faced by this population were to accede to asylum procedures and then to initiate the search for durable solutions.

As the new refugee population grew, its necessities became more evident. Given that voluntary repatriation was not a possible short term solution, neither at the beginning of the decade nor at the present moment, local integration has been the most viable alternative and the one that best fits with the socioeconomic profile of the new Colombian refugees. In isolated instances at the beginning and in a more constantly and systematic manner later on, resettlement became an exceptional durable solution, complementing local integration efforts.

The Contreras family was one of the first resettled cases. Composed of 5 members, the family left Colombia in 2000 to seek protection in Costa Rica where they were recognized as refugees in 2001.

Despite this protection and the tranquility it inspired in them, the family soon began to experience difficulties of a different nature. The oldest son of the family, Andres, was barely 12 years old when he began to undergo respiratory complications. After several medical tests with diverse specialists, it became clear that the humid and tropical weather of Costa Rica was affecting him.

The family went to UNHCR in search of support. When verifying that Andres did indeed need a different climate, the case was submitted to a Scandinavian country which accepted to resettle the family in 2002 for medical reasons.

Other resettlement cases followed, leading to the establishment of a specialized resettlement programme within UNHCR in the year 2003. This programme analyzes, processes and submits cases to different countries with resettlement quotas.

Since its establishment, 822 Colombian refugees have been resettled from Costa Rica. In addition to cases with medical needs, these have included women at risk, refugees with legal and physical protection needs, or those in need of resettlement for local integration reasons.

The programme has been adapted to address current challenges. This is not easy in a context of financial limitations. The most significant of these challenges include ensuring effective support to refugees about to depart, offering safe lodging, urgent medical attention and accompaniment. The second challenge consists of reinforcing and diversifying the integration capacity of refugees in the first country of asylum so that resettlement does not become a mechanism that encourages migration.

In the meantime, the Contreras family has tried to resume its life with normality in the new country of asylum. “We have overcome the difficulties, we have adapted to this country. The previous difficulties were due to the ignorance of our rights. We have already overcome the language problems. We live in a beautiful city where we still get government aid and we speak the language more fluently. Our children are very happy and healthy and already speak five languages (English, Norwegian, Danish, Swedish, Spanish and they are studying German). I believe that we have obtained a lot”, said Mr. Contreras from his resettlement country.

By Giovanni Monge in Costa Rica

Since the resettlement programme started in 2003, UNHCR in Costa Rica has resettled more than 800 refugees, almost all of them were Colombian nationals.
Resettlement in Brazil

Brazil is the country where we are going to rebuild our lives”, said one refugee. This wish is presently shared by more than 200 refugees resettled in Brazil since 2003.

Brazil signed a resettlement agreement with UNHCR in 1999, and received small groups of Afghans and Colombians in 2002 and 2003. The Brazilian government’s solidarity was reaffirmed during the discussions on the Twentieth Anniversary of the Cartagena Declaration, when the country presented the idea of creating a regional resettlement programme, based on the principles of international solidarity and responsibility sharing. The proposal was welcomed and consolidated in the Mexico Plan of Action as the Solidarity Resettlement Programme.

The refugees resettled in Brazil are mainly Colombians who faced continued persecution and lacked integration prospects in Ecuador, Costa Rica and Panama. Half of the refugees are children and adolescents, and 20% of the families are single-headed by women. The cases of women-at-risk receive special attention from the Brazilian government, including women victims of violence and women heads of households. The integration of these women requires special activities such as child care, psychological assistance and adequate integration into the labor market.

The resettlement programme in Brazil involves the tripartite collaboration between UNHCR, the government at different levels and civil society. The selection missions which interview refugees in the first country of asylum, are composed of UNHCR, CONARE (National Committee for Refugees) and one NGO involved in the reception and integration of refugees. CONARE then approves the cases between two or three months after the interview. Brazil has also developed a special procedure to approve urgent resettlement cases in 72 hours which enables the arrival of the refugee in a maximum of seven days.

Refugees are resettled in different Brazilian states in order to improve their prospects for economic integration, and essentially due to security reasons in view of the multiplicity of persecution agents involved in the Colombian conflict. Presently 22 Brazilian towns in four states have received resettled Colombian refugees.

Refugee reception and integration activities are carried out by four NGOs, each one responsible for the implementation of the programme in one region. Refugees receive a subsistence allowance for a limited period of 6 to 12 months, while they pursue self-reliance which is the main goal of the local integration process. Upon arrival, refugees are already aware of the hardships faced in a developing country. “The interviewers were very honest with me, they told about the living conditions in Brazil, about the unemployment, but also about the good things and the challenges I would find there”, said one refugee who arrived under the programme.

Different measures were developed to meet the need for economic integration. Besides Portuguese classes, refugees are provided with professional qualification courses. The implementation of a credit project benefiting refugees and the local community has enabled refugees who are unable to integrate into the formal labor market to attain self-reliance. Another major problem in local integration is housing, so the participation of municipalities and the federal housing credit scheme is crucial.

However, despite the difficulties they face refugees feel safe and well-integrated in Brazil and enjoy the opportunity to rebuild their lives in a welcoming environment. “In other countries people remind you all the time that you are Colombian, but in Brazil, people don’t show prejudice and don’t ask you where you are from. It is a country formed by migration, thus used to welcome people.”

By Thais Bessa in Brasilia

Refugees resettled in Brazil.
Resettlement programmes in Argentina and Chile offer a new opportunity

One is first struck by Ana’s bright smile and her big black eyes. A few minutes into the conversation however, her intelligence and strength shine through.

This 28 year old Colombian woman arrived in Chile less than a year ago with her husband and two children. She was selected for a sales position by an insurance company soon after and still works there. In spite of its being an area where those with social contacts generally do best, she has actually exceeded objectives set for her by the company, and says that her colleagues have become her second family.

So far, it is Ana who provides for the family as her husband is currently undergoing training in the airline industry. Her children go to school, have friends and according to their mother, already speak with a Chilean accent. “Although we arrived in Chile by chance – we only wanted to get out of Colombia and it did not matter where to - we are happy to be in Chile,” she says.

Ana, her husband and children are some of the refugees who arrived in South America under a resettlement programme. It receives refugees who continued to face protection problems or serious obstacles to their integration in the first country they fled to. In this family’s case, it had arrived in Costa Rica more than a year and a half ago, but did not feel safe due to threats they still received.

About 150 refugees from the former Yugoslavia, Iraq, Afghanistan, and later on, mostly from Colombia have found a second opportunity in Chile. As they integrate into this new society, they receive the support of the Chilean Government, UNHCR and its local partner Vicaría de Pastoral Social, who apply a multidisciplinary approach to their work. Most adult refugees are now working and settling into Chilean society.

Chile was the first South American country to start a resettlement programme, in 1999. Since then Brazil and most recently, Argentina have joined. Thirty-four Colombian refugee men, women, boys and girls — who had fled Costa Rica and Ecuador but for different reasons could not stay — arrived in Argentina last November and December.

An Inter-ministerial Commission has been created to provide the most efficient follow up to the resettlement programme. It is formed by representatives of the ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, Health, Labor, Education and Social Development, as well as several other ministries, UNHCR and HIAS (Hebrew Assistance Society), a non governmental organization with 125 years of experience in supporting migrants and refugees.

Enrique Burbinsky, HIAS Director for Latin America, is aware of the challenges facing those embarking on a new life in Argentina. When describing the work carried out by HIAS he says: “Our job is to provide refugees with orientation (on their new society and its practices) fa-
we really regret this,” says Flor Rojas, UNHCR Regional Representative for Southern Latin America, “the programme has good prospects both in Argentina and in Chile.”

By Nazli Zaki in Buenos Aires
Cuba is one of the asylum countries that for many years have temporarily sheltered refugees, mainly from Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. Since the 1990s, UNHCR’s regional office in Mexico coordinates the resettlement for these refugees.

In the late 1980s, Cuba carried out a scholarship programme for students from different continents, mainly from Africa. Through this programme, the Cuban government covers the costs of education, food, housing and medical assistance of students. The programme is aimed at providing technical and professional training for youngsters so that they can later return to their countries of origin and work as doctors, teachers, engineers and lawyers, among other professions.

However, during the 1990s, when the time to go back home arrived, some of these young African students faced a situation where armed conflicts, coup d’états, and displacement had torn their countries apart, restraining their return. With repatriation being out of the question, since 1997 UNHCR has helped to coordinate the resettlement of mainly Sudanese refugees (over 250 persons), mostly to Canada, as well as other groups of refugees such as Ethiopians, Congolese and Rwandese.

UNHCR also studies the cases of those refugees who have spontaneously arrived to Cuba, fleeing persecution in their countries of origin. These refugees came from countries in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East, and Asia. In Cuba, they receive some assistance from UNHCR for housing and other basic needs, while the Cuban government allows them to benefit from the free health and education facilities.

This was the case of Ramin and his family, who escaped from Herat, Afghanistan when he was 14 years old, fleeing the Taliban regime. In 2000, they arrived to Cuba and were recognized as mandate refugees by UNHCR, since Cuba is neither yet a Party to the 1951 Convention, nor the 1967 Protocol. In spite of this, the Cuban government allows refugees like Ramin to stay in the country while UNHCR processes their resettlement. Ramin and his brothers attended school in Havana during the five years that they lived there.

For many refugees, this is a welcome opportunity. “When I came to Cuba, I was almost illiterate, but with the assistance of UNHCR I could study in Cuban schools. I graduated from a technical high school. I also learnt to speak English and Spanish, and studied dentistry”, said Ramin.

Finally, in October 2005, Ramin and his family were accepted for resettlement by Finland. The differences between the country of origin and their resettlement country might be radical. “It’s like you were living inside an oven, and all of a sudden you move to a fridge”, says Ramin. Although he has joyful memories of the time he spent in Cuba, Ramin and his family are adapting to their new life in Finland, where they have Afghan friends who they play football with.

Since 2002, UNHCR has found resettlement opportunities for 119 refugees living in Cuba into the USA, Brazil, Netherlands, Switzerland, Norway, United Kingdom, Finland, Denmark and Canada.

By Mariana Echandi in Mexico
For a refugee from Saddam’s Iraq, a new home requires a global odyssey

Mustafa Jaffar’s flight into exile began six years ago in northern Iraq. It ended a few weeks ago when he left the small Caribbean nation of Trinidad and Tobago for a new home and a new life in New Zealand.

Mustafa’s story, like those of all refugees, began with fear. Born in Najaf into a family prominent in the Shiite community, Mustafa became aware at an early age of the unwanted attention of Saddam Hussein’s regime. His brother-in-law was hanged because of his membership in a banned religious party. At the age of 15, Mustafa and his family were detained and interrogated about a brother’s alleged anti-government activities. Over the course of four days he was regularly beaten by his jailors.

His family’s seizure occurred as Iraqi forces were invading Kuwait. Six months later, following Iraq’s expulsion by coalition forces, they were once again arrested and accused of taking part in a failed uprising which followed Saddam’s defeat. Mustafa’s father and brother were never seen again.

With links to both a family and a religious group now looked upon with suspicion by the government, Mustafa knew that safety could only be found beyond the reach of Saddam Hussein.

At 18 he began his journey, traveling first to Kurdish northern Iraq. A series of illegal entries into Iran and Turkey followed, each one ending with deportation. When officials in northern Iraq began threatening to send him south to where Saddam’s Ba’ath party was still in control, he sought refuge further afield.

Back in Turkey he met a smuggler, who, for ten thousand Euros, promised to get Mustafa into the United States or a European country where he could then claim asylum. He was supplied with a false passport and a ticket to Venezuela, where he was told he would be given an EU passport.

“We were taken to a safe house,” says Mustafa. “I couldn’t speak a word of English, but the man we were staying with spoke Arabic. He told me it was taking time to find a passport and that I should be patient. Eventually he said we should fly to Trinidad.”

Mustafa was housed in the capital, Port of Spain. Two weeks went by with no word on his documents. Alone in a strange country and with his money running out he decided to seek help. He approached the UN Information Centre in the city which then notified UNHCR’s Honorary Liaison in Trinidad, who in turn sought the help of the regional office for the United States and the Caribbean in Washington, DC.

“Mustafa’s case illustrates both the usefulness, indeed the indispensability, of the UNHCR Honorary Liaison system in place in the Caribbean, where we do not have offices, and the need for more and better refugee protection capacity in the Caribbean region” said Janice Marshall, UNHCR’s Senior Regional Protection Officer for the Caribbean for much of the time Mustafa has spent in Trinidad. “The Government of Trinidad and Tobago is willing to receive and protect people like Mustafa, but has no concrete law or policy in place to ensure..."
they have access to an asylum procedure or to all the refugee rights to which international law says they are entitled.”

Mustafa arrived in Trinidad one month before the country acceded to the 1951 Convention on the status of refugees. After examining his case thoroughly, in 2002 the UN refugee agency recognized him as refugee, unable to return home for fear of persecution. The decision was communicated to the Government of Trinidad, which agreed to extend him refugee status.

In the absence of a law in Trinidad setting out the treatment and rights accorded to refugees, Mustafa was unable to obtain a work permit, an identity document or to integrate into his new home. He became increasingly depressed and in 2005, boarded a flight to London, where he was detained by immigration officials and, as he had already been accepted as a refugee in Trinidad, sent back.

“That was lowest point for me,” he says. “I felt totally lost and exhausted. But UNHCR continued to provide support and gave me hope that I could be resettled.”

In early May that hope was realized when the Government of New Zealand granted him residency. After three years Mustafa can apply for citizenship and a passport.

While preparing for his departure for Auckland, Mustafa was housed by UNHCR’s Honorary Liaison in Trinidad within a Christian community, where priests, nuns and lay people became his closest friends and supporters, despite their differing religious beliefs.

“People in Trinidad have opened their homes to me and I’m very grateful,” says Mustafa “If I can get a passport, I hope that I will be able to return and see them again. For the first time in many years, the future is no longer something to be feared.”

By Tim Irwin in Washington D.C.
Canada’s resettlement programme

Catalina was subjected to the most brutal form of human degradation at the hands of Colombian rebel guerrillas. She fled to Ecuador and resigned herself to remaining there even though her ability to build herself a secure and productive life was severely constrained by the discrimination she faced from local residents. Her problem in Ecuador was one of triple victimization: for being Colombian, for being a lesbian and for being a woman.

When informed by UNHCR that she was accepted to Canada for resettlement, Catalina’s initial reaction was one of utter disbelief. Months later, on the eve of her departure, she no longer harbors any doubts. “I feel in my heart that I have to go there in search of a better future. I just feel it. The language and the culture are different. At my age it may not be so easy to adapt but it is a challenge I know I need to face.”

Canada is a major country of resettlement for refugees. Last year Canada accepted 10,000 refugees from 75 different nationalities, 70% of whom were women and children. The largest number came from Afghanistan, followed by Colombia, Sudan, Ethiopia, Liberia and Iraq.

The importance of Canada as a resettlement country is not strictly about numbers. It is also about Canada’s resettlement programme being responsive to urgent and vulnerable protection cases identified by UNHCR. Last year, 535 refugees who like Catalina, were survivors of torture and sexual violence, were accepted through Canada’s “Women-at-Risk” programme.

Canada has also played a key role in developing the strategic use of resettlement to open up other durable solutions for refugees such as local integration and voluntary repatriation. The resettlement of an estimated 1,000 Afghan refugees from the Central Asian Republics helped secure the agreement by the governments of Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan to allow the naturalization of 10,000 Afghan refugees who had been residing in those countries for years.

One of those resettled to Canada was Belqis, an Afghan widow. She journeyed from Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan to Ottawa with her two young daughters and her toddler son. She spent seven long years exiled in Bishkek. Life was harsh, but bearable until her husband died suddenly of a heart attack. “I couldn’t stop crying for a whole month she recalls. “It was a month after he died that my first interview for resettlement took place”. A few days after arriving in Ottawa she contemplates her future with a sense of trepidation and wonderment. “I have to be an optimist, I have to believe that everything will work out, that even though I am 43, I will find a job to support my children.”

A unique feature of Canada’s resettlement programme is that in addition to government-sponsored refugees, it allows individual Canadians and faith communities to privately sponsor refugees. Some 3,000 are admitted through the private sponsorship programme every year. Clement Olomoi, a refugee from southern Sudan spent 10 years in Cairo, Egypt. The Anglican Church sponsored him and his family. It was a long, anxiety-ridden process that lasted two years but when Clement and his family eventually arrived in Ottawa, they were provided with a lovely furnished home. The sponsors helped them out with the usual formalities of registering the children in school, opening a bank account, applying for health coverage and social insurance. “We are lucky to come with private sponsors, because I know of (government-sponsored) refugees who came before us and who stayed at the reception house a long time before finding a house.”

Clement sums up the individual care, friendship and attention they received from their Canadian sponsors by saying “Even though I have traveled thousands of kilometers, I feel good. I feel like I am still at home”.

By Nanda Na Champassak in Ottawa with contributions from Xavier Orellana in Quito
Solidarity at the borders:
Investing in durable solutions

“I began by selling wafers, then through a micro-credit programme I bought the machine to make them, which allowed me to make enough profit to save some money,” says Alejandra, an asylum-seeker and beneficiary of one the micro-credit programmes that are helping hundreds of people like her in Venezuela become self-sufficient.

“By making and selling wafers, I have been able to improve the welfare of my family and to pay the rent. Besides, I provide employment to one man and to his son,” smiles Alejandra.

Since 2003, UNHCR in Venezuela has been supporting refugees and asylum-seekers living in communities along the border with Colombia through income-generating projects with non-repayable capital investment. In almost all cases, the funds assigned were efficiently used, with quick recovery of the capital invested, allowing for the creation of a reliable source of income.

Given the excellent previous results and after consulting with the people concerned about the challenges of taking on the responsibilities, UNHCR began to implement a programme of small loans.

In February 2005, a cooperation agreement was reached with Cáritas of Venezuela, the Jesuit Service for Refugees, the Financing Cooperative for Micro, Small and Medium Enterprise (FINAMPYME, for its acronym in Spanish) and UNHCR. Four months later 45 projects had been approved for a total of US$ 19,000 for the benefit of 227 persons, most of them women.

With the purpose of promoting gender equality, FINAMPYME encourages the active participation of women throughout the entire application process. In cases where the beneficiaries are a couple, both the man and the woman are encouraged to take part in the process.

“These loans are granted for commercial activities, taking into consideration the specific manual and professional skills of the applicants,” says Dené Pernía, a FINAMPYME official.

The loans are approved by vetting committees composed of members from the participating institutions, who are also responsible for technical support and monitoring. The beneficiaries have 12 months to pay up the loan, with a fixed monthly rate of 1.5 to 2%, depending on the type of credit.

In Venezuela, micro-credits are directly implemented by the beneficiaries, who can be either an association of several persons taking part in one project, or individuals who have applied for the loan on a sole basis.

Luis lives with his mother and his niece. Together with other asylum-seekers, he put forward a project to grow peppers in the mountains near San Cristóbal. It is not an easily accessible land, but he has overcome the hurdles and is now employing five other persons from the local community. “This is our first harvest, and I believe it is going to be very productive,” Luis says. “We are hoping to set up our own stand at the market soon as we want to bring our produce directly to the people.”

Due to the vast distances and the remoteness of some of the communities, especially in Alto Apure, and in order to minimize costs and maximize efficiency, the programme is directly managed by the Jesuit Service for Refugees from its offices in El Nula and Guasdualito.

The FINAMPYME programme was very successful in 2005 and is likely to grow this year with the International Committee for the Development of the People (CISP) expected to join the initiative in order to increase the number of beneficiaries, to cover people of concern to UNHCR living in Maracaibo and Caracas. For this purpose, a Letter of Intent will be signed with the Foundation for the Development of Popular Economy (FUDEP, for its acronym in Spanish), a specialized agency with offices in both cities.

By Bernardo Pisani in Caracas

An asylum seeker who received a micro-credit in her store in Venezuela.
One afternoon in early March, Ana picked up the phone after several months of waiting to call UNHCR and ask what was going on with the trip abroad that, according to the information she had been given, the refugee agency was organizing for her. The UNHCR staff member who answered her call found himself in the distressing position of having to explain that there would be no such trip because she had been cheated. Ana, who had put her trust in a man who had told her that he worked as an intermediary for UNHCR and various embassies, had sold her house in order to pay for the trip. She had been promised a new and peaceful life as a political refugee in a foreign country.

Although Ana’s case is one of the worst to have come to UNHCR’s attention in the past few months, it is far from being the only example of fraud involving organizations and individuals who are promising to take people out of Colombia as “refugees”. The fraudsters say they are acting as intermediaries with foreign embassies, national bodies and international organizations like UNHCR. Some of these unscrupulous individuals claim to be working for, or associated with, the refugee agency.

The majority of the people who fall victims to the fraud never get to travel anywhere. Those who do usually end up being deported from the foreign country they have arrived to. Like Ana, they can lose their entire life savings in the process.

“Help” that costs millions

The more than one hundred thousand Colombian people who have asked for asylum abroad since the year 2000 make up a population large enough for a small city. Many people in this country have seen family members or friends killed, threatened, kidnapped or forced to leave everything behind to flee the violence.

In such a context, swindlers find it very easy to cheat people. Among their victims are persons with a well-founded fear of persecution, who are entitled to international protection. Others are seduced by stories of an easy life abroad; people like Julia whose son was in need of an operation abroad and who thought the only way to get a visa would be to pretend to be an asylum seeker.

UNHCR has heard stories of people who have attempted the trip to rich countries in Europe and America with the “help” of fraudsters who charge large amounts of money in order, they say, to process paperwork with embassies and international organizations. There have been cases of these people charging money to fabricate false asylum claims based on fake stories of alleged persecution. Even genuine asylum-seekers among their clients who eventually received international protection got it in spite of the fraudsters, rather than because of their help.

Although UNHCR knows of and has reported to the authorities some of these cases, it is clear that the majority remain undetected. UNHCR staff have travelled twice in recent weeks to the city of Cali, where some fraud cases have been reported, in order to alert the local population through the media.

Until now, it has proved difficult to get people to talk and put forward evidence against the fraudsters, since many are afraid of retaliation. “But it is not going to be so easy for unscrupulous individuals to cheat on their fellow Colombians with the promise of easy access through asylum,” says Roberto Meier, the UNHCR Representative in Colombia. “UNHCR’s mission now is to stay alert and to continue warning the population in order to avoid that more people become fraud victims.”

“It is very painful,” says one of the persons who contacted UNHCR, “to see those people who already have so many problems, who have gone through so much pain, put all their hopes in the hands of swindlers.”

By Gustavo Valdivieso in Bogota
Costa Rica: new documentation will benefit refugees

As of late January this year, the Costa Rican General Direction for Migration began the issuance of the so-called Single Migratory Document (SMD), a new document that will be given to all foreigners legally residing in the country, including refugees. With the adoption of the SMD, eight different migratory documents will be merged into a single one, something that is expected to benefit the foreign population in Costa Rica.

With respect to refugees, it is expected that the change of documentation will mean a faster and less complicated access by refugees to certain institutions such as banks, schools and health centers. The current refugee identification card is very little known, something that limits the access of this population to local integration possibilities. Investment in high technology equipment will render the new document safer and more difficult to alter and to manipulate.

As key counterparts of the General Direction for Migration, UNHCR and IOM will support this institution in its diffusion efforts of the new Single Migratory Document through the production of pamphlets, posters and radial ads.

The adoption of the Single Migratory Document is framed within the restructuring process of the General Direction for Migrations, where UNHCR also contributed with resources and equipment in the interview areas of asylum applicants.

Art unites Young Colombians and Ecuadorians

In 2005, UNHCR’s office in Ibarra, together with its partner agency “Fundación Ambiente y Sociedad” (FAS), began supporting a group of Colombian youth determined to dedicate their lives to art. The group, which calls itself “Pickart Group”, was soon joined by 35 Ecuadorian youngsters with similar ambitions. At the same time, FUNDESAV, the agency in charge of implementing projects to promote the local integration of refugees, also spotted the group’s potential and put together a project to support the initiative.

“This group caught our attention because of their energy and their desire to push forward,” says Ghandy Marcelo.
Vásquez of FUNDESAV. “We did not think twice about supporting them with a UNHCR-funded project. These young people have discovered that through art they can express what they feel and show the different faces of refugees and of those who welcome them.”

The project helped the group with legal fees and also financed courses for the artists to perfect their skills. With the project’s support, they were also able to buy costumes and the props they need for their performances. Evelin Alpala, one of the group’s members, proudly recalls how they all took part in the building of the stage-set and in the design of the wardrobe.

The group had their official premiere in April. They had performed on past occasions, but this time the audience was made up of their parents, as well as staff from UNHCR and other organizations. The event took place in a school located in Alpachaca neighborhood, where Colombian and Ecuadorian families co-exist. The group presented more than ten different numbers, including dance and music performances. In an atmosphere filled with color and rhythms, everyone for a few hours forgot where they came from in order to better enjoy the results of the creative work of the children of Alpachaca.

Wounaan Indigenous Communities

The Wounaan indigenous communities of the Medio San Juan region of western Colombia fled their ancestral territories for the first time ever this April after two of their leaders were murdered in the space of 48 hours by members of an irregular armed group. Within a day, 1,748 people from five communities had gathered in the Wounaan’s biggest settlement, Union Wounaan, waiting to make the eight-hour trip upriver to the small city of Istmina.

The Director of UNHCR’s Bureau for the Americas, Philippe Lavanchy, was in Colombia at the time and changed
his agenda to go to Istmina at the very start of the crisis, when hundreds of Wounaan people were making their way to the city. The situation he found upon arrival was difficult, with many of the newcomers, including a large number of pregnant women and children, staying in derelict houses on the riverbanks with no access to basic services, clean water or food.

Lavanchy appealed to the local authorities to provide the newly displaced families with appropriate and immediate assistance. UNHCR also worked with the authorities, the local church and partner agencies to address the situation of those remaining in Wounaan territory. Concern grew over the days for the safety of indigenous families still waiting to come to Istmina but unable to do so because of lack of boats and gasoline.

Forced displacement is especially hard for indigenous people, whose cultures are closely linked to the land they and their ancestors have lived on. Entire communities, with their unique language and culture, are at risk of being wiped out in the Colombian conflict. To avoid this tragedy, UNHCR is working throughout Colombia to help indigenous leaders fight for the right of their people to remain on their territories.

Third Colombian-Ecuadorian encounter in Quito

Quito’s peaceful Itchimbia Park was a centre of unusual activity in March when it became home to a handicraft show with some 90 stall holders selling their different products. Fourteen of the participants at the fair were either refugees or asylum seekers, most of them beneficiaries of a micro-credit project known as “Integration for Progress” from the Communal Bank in Quito. Two similar fairs were held in 2005 and according to María Clara Eguiguren from the Foundation Ambiente y Sociedad (FAS), UNHCR’s implementing partner in charge of running the project,
For three days, an old Mexican hacienda in the town of Ometusco—near the Teotihuacan pyramids—housed UNHCR staff and their partners from Belize, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua.

This planning exercise not only provided a joint strategy between UNHCR, the civil society and the government of Mexico, but also strengthened the commitment of officials and partners to design initiatives for team work in favor of refugees in fields such as the Mexico Plan of Action, the strengthening of the legal protection of asylum seekers and refugees, reactivation of protection networks, boosting up the initiatives for the local integration of refugees in their host communities, and the facilitation of the participation of refugees themselves in the planning process.

In the spirit of renovation guiding the work of the UN system and particularly of the UN Refugee Agency, UNHCR’s regional office in Mexico invited all its partners to a Planning Retreat to design a working plan for 2006-2007 with strategies and specific activities to improve the protection of asylum seekers and refugees in the region.
Refugee Voices

My name is Marie Rose, I’m Burundian and I came to Cuba two years ago. My family is Tutsi and we were attacked in several occasions by Hutu rebels. Some of my relatives were murdered and my husband was beaten and had his leg amputated.

What I had heard of Cuba before coming was something else, almost opposite to reality. Now I am almost used to my life here. I just finished studying hair dressing and now I am taking sewing lessons. I took Spanish and Italian courses and Computer studies at the university. I also attended a business management course, as well as on negotiation, and marketing, and courses on basic and oriental massages.

I am now waiting to be resettled in Canada. I plan to work and start over my life with my family. It’s the most precious dream I have… to see them again! I have three children. The eldest is 12 years old; the second is 10 and my youngest just celebrated his birthday last month.

It’s very hard to be in touch with my family. I like to phone them but it’s quite expensive. Life is tough because I have spent so much time away from my family. It’s the harshest time I have lived.

The meditation course I took is helping me to face my current life, the pain, and the depression. I enjoy seeing the ocean and meditating, I sit by the shore to gaze at the waves.

The future is vague because I don’t know exactly what fate has in store for me. I hope I can work as a masseuse. I really like the massage because when a person comes to you with a pain, you can help him or her to get rid of it. To me, it’s my passion.

I used to have a peaceful life with my wife and children in Colombia, and I used to know everyone in my neighborhood and town. When the police started implementing the “communitarian policies” in the neighborhood, I was elected to be the local coordinator. Right after that, the guerrillas began to threat to kill me, and I had to flee to Ecuador.

There another refugee told me to look for UNHCR, which supported me to be recognized as refugee in Ecuador and also to try to bring my family, who was still in Colombia. One day I called my wife, who told me that people have been in my house, asking about me, and they told her they knew I was in Ecuador. I called a cousin, and he was later murdered. I talked to UNHCR people, and they told me about the resettlement programme and the possibility to go to Brazil. My first reaction was surprise, because it is very hard to go to a country you know nothing about, and you can’t predict what is going to happen. The interviewers from Brazil told us about the reality in the country.

We were briefed informed that we had been accepted to be resettled there. The arrival was full of expectations, but we were very welcomed by Caritas, and everybody in the community was willing to help and support us. The Brazilian people are very friendly and very warm.

Today my wife and I are both working, we learnt Portuguese, we have attended professional courses, I had three promotions in my job, and our children are doing very well in school. I have requested family reunification with my mother, and she is already living with us and has adapted to the country. We can afford our expenses, I have my own car and we will save money to buy a house. I think Brazil is where we are going to live and rebuild our lives. Maybe when things get more peaceful in our home country, we may go there, but now I am very thankful to everyone who helped us.
After a number of years devoted to resettlement issues at the Swedish Migration Board, and having shared experiences with colleagues from other resettlement countries, with UNHCR’s resettlement section in Geneva, and with field offices during a number of selection missions, I realized that the traditional and somewhat mechanical resettlement concept should be renewed and modernized.

Refugee resettlement programmes are indeed an important way for countries to share the responsibility to respond to humanitarian crises by addressing refugee problems, both regionally and globally. Sweden has a long tradition of providing protection to refugees in the Latin American region through resettlement, and will continue to offer its resettlement programme to the region in the future.

The Solidarity Resettlement component of the Mexico Plan of Action is a good example of a new vision of resettlement. Firstly, it contributes to increase the number of resettlement countries to strengthen the global resettlement system, and provide a wider range of resettlement options. Moreover, for a number of refugees, resettlement to a country within their region of origin, where the language is familiar, can be a preferred option to resettlement to another region. When the situation stabilizes in Colombia, the country will have their resource persons close by, who can make a significant contribution towards both their home and their host country. Therefore, Sweden now wants to extend its support to sustainable resettlement projects within Latin America.

Argentina, Brazil and Chile can, together with other countries in the region, offer the diversity of resettlement places that is needed regionally as well as globally, as a manifestation of their solidarity with the refugees hosted by neighboring countries receiving a large number of primarily Colombians in need of international protection. By engaging in refugee resettlement, these emerging resettlement countries can gain new insights into the asylum and resettlement process, and thus enhance the effective protection of refugees overall, both nationally and within the region.

The “First Meeting on Solidarity Resettlement”, which took place in Quito (Ecuador) on 2-3 February 2006, aimed at finding ways to strengthen and consolidate the Solidarity Resettlement Programme in the region. During this meeting, Sweden offered to support this project in various ways, such as through “twinning arrangements”, exchange of civil servants with expertise on refugee interviewing techniques, as well as financial support (pending a formal decision by the Swedish Government). Already in 2003, Sweden sponsored a twinning arrangement with Brazil for capacity building, which enabled an official from CONARE Brazil to visit Sweden to receive training on resettlement.

My experience, through our previous involvement with emerging resettlement programmes, has shown that a broad range of national and international actors need to be involved in all stages of the resettlement process. To assure its success, it is imperative for the respective Governments of emerging resettlement countries to express their political will by taking ownership of their programmes, and to base the programme on strong institutional foundations. This is of particular importance for the integration of resettled refugees, as this component ultimately would lead to the sustainability of resettlement in the respective countries. The putting in place of a resettlement programme also needs to be done in close cooperation with UNHCR, as well as NGOs and refugees. This will strengthen the long-term possibility for the regional Solidarity Resettlement Programme to offer protection to those in need, and to strengthen the protection network in Latin America.

By Rubin Ahlvin, Senior Refugee Quota Coordinator, Swedish Migration Board
A week in Guasdualito

Monday:
After spending the weekend in Palmarito, where we are setting up a weaving workshop for Venezuelan and Colombian refugee women, we are working today in and around Guasdualito, where UNHCR has a small field office. Apure State is enormous, and our area of responsibility covers more than 700 kilometres along the border with Colombia. In order to fulfill our protection duty everywhere and to reach out to remote rural communities, we travel for hours on the few roads that exist in the region or in canoes down the many rivers – like the Arauca, the Apure and the Sarare – that make up the beautiful landscape of the Venezuelan plains. This morning I go with my Protection colleague, Valentina, to a meeting with the Regional Technical Secretariat for Refugees, to discuss our intention to bring to Guasdualito some asylum seekers who are at the moment living in far-away and difficult to reach communities. We need to get the support and the approval of this governmental body, since without their consent we will not be able to go through the many checkpoints that exercise heavy military control throughout the border area. The meeting turns out to be positive: we get the support of the local office for refugees and we are even allowed to issue temporary documentation to some vulnerable families this week.

Tuesday:
Today we are going on mission to the community of Santa Paula, where UNHCR plans to support the expansion of the local school, with the help of members of the community. Venezuelan and refugee families have spent much time and efforts in community meetings to discuss the growing needs of the local school, which has opened its doors to Colombian refugee children who have come here in search of safety and of the chance to start over again. The community gives a warm welcome to our colleagues Javier, in charge of Programmes, and Dario, our driver and trusted help in the field. It is interesting to observe how the rivers shape the lifestyle of these communities. The river is their means of transportation, their protection, and the throughway from which they buy and sell everything they need. Without the river they would not have much access to any commodities, and the refugees here would also not have access to international protection. The community has put forward a plan outlining the needs of the school, the result of many consultations with community leaders, mothers, fathers, even children who are asking for a swing: after all, they do have the right to play. With this plan we can prepare a project to be presented as part of the Community Support and Integration Programme (PACI, for its acronym in Spanish) that UNHCR implements along the border. We return to the office to integrate the project within the PACI framework and to add up the finishing touches.

Wednesday:
We go on mission to the other end of the region. Once again, our traveling companion is the river. It takes five hours by canoe to reach El Mangal, on the banks of the river that separates Venezuela from Colombia. We have implemented several community projects here, and even helped the local school get its own canoe to act as a school bus. The canoe is now doing its daily round, Colombian and Venezuelan parents all contribute to the cost of gasoline, the local government helps with the maintenance and the teacher acts as captain of the vessel that transports the future of the community from one bank of the river to the other. The canoe picks up the children from school and brings them back to their homes, located along the banks of the river. This safe and efficient means of transportation means that many children no longer have to walk two to three hours to get to and back from school, allowing them more free time to be with their families, do their homework, play with their friends or even catch some of the fishes so abundant in the river. Due to the distance, we have to sleep in the community; we brought our own hammocks or “chinchorros” (a light version of the hammock). We ask permission from the school teacher, who kindly allows us to hang our hammocks in a covered space (the rain is the first portent of a very wet winter that is just around the corner) and get ready for an evening of planning, consultations and chats with the refugee families present in the area. They share their plans and wishes for the development of the community, which they went to work on in their own style. This is part of the job, to make what we call international protection and development fit to the reality on the ground within the context of each community. Working with communities in Alto Apure we have learned to listen and to understand the common needs of Venezuelan and Colombian refugee families. By understanding these needs and by supporting refugee-hosting communities on a day-to-day basis, we
are able to help them develop and strengthen their own capacity to find answers and solutions for themselves. Thus all projects are prepared in consultation, all plans are shared with the communities, and every accomplishment belongs to every member of the community, regardless of which bank of the river he or she comes from. We go to sleep late, after a long conversation with Javier, Dario and several members of the community.

Thursday:
We wake up early as the canoe that will take us back leaves at 06:00am. Minutes before, we arrive at the riverside with our backpacks. When we get back to our office at around 11:30 hours, good news awaits us: Valentina tells us that the families that had been waiting for their documents received them yesterday and have even gone back to their communities - with their documents! We have to prepare the mission report and Dario helps me out with some of the information we gathered in the communities. Later, we register more families of refugees that have just arrived from Colombia; they say that other families are on their way. Their stories are of war, violence and persecution. Their misfortune was to live where others seemingly did not want them to live. The cases of many Colombian asylum seekers are the same: many times they flee simply because they lived in the wrong place, or to put it more precisely in a place where they lived under constant threat. We receive them with a “tintico” (black coffee) and time and patience to listen to their experiences, how they managed to survive and to make their way to our office.

Friday:
We begin our day with a meeting with Manelly, who is part of the Guasdualito team and our specialist in conflict prevention in Alto Apure. We are organizing some activities with local implementing partners: courses on Human Rights, empowerment of local community leaders, professional skills workshops, community meetings, among other things. Many of the activities involve women in host communities. We also hold a staff meeting in the afternoon - we try to do this at least once a week, but it has turned to be difficult. This week we can do it: we discuss and share the projects and priorities for next week and we also finish up the project to help the school in Santa Paula. Ready! We are sharing it with our colleagues in the capital and in headquarters.

By Jose Francisco Sieber in Venezuela