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Update on UNHCR's operations in the Americas

A. Situational overview

Update on UNHCR's operations in the Americas

The Americas region currently hosts more than 18.4 million refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons (IDPs) and stateless persons, representing some 20 per cent of persons of concern to UNHCR worldwide. Across the region, population movements continued, despite the extension of border closures due to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

Venezuela situation

Refugees and migrants from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) totalled 5.7 million persons globally by September 2021, of which more than 80 per cent were hosted by countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. More than 171,000 were recognized as refugees, while over 850,000 asylum claims were lodged worldwide. Across the region, just under 2.7 million were granted some form of residency or regular stay permit.

With the extension of border closures to limit the COVID-19 pandemic, refugees and migrants resorted to irregular crossings, often using smuggling networks and exposing themselves to heightened protection risks. With no specific protocol to allow access to territory during the pandemic, available protection space was greatly reduced.

More than 30 per cent of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in the region did not have access to regular stay arrangements, resulting in limited access to formal labour markets and social safety nets. This left many exposed to exploitation and abuse, eviction and homelessness, and in some cases detention or deportation.

In this context, UNHCR welcomed the decision of several countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Peru and Uruguay, to initiate regularization or temporary protection programmes benefiting over 3 million refugees and migrants from Venezuela (the Bolivarian Republic of). The confirmation of almost all host countries in the region to include refugees and migrants in their vaccination programmes was also a positive development.

Inside Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), UNHCR provided protection and assistance to refugees as well as to Venezuelan nationals, in line with the humanitarian response plan. It was estimated that some 7 million people were in need of humanitarian assistance in the country. Through the protection cluster and the shelter, energy and non-food items cluster, UNHCR supported persons on-the-move and at risk of displacement, host communities and limited numbers of spontaneous returnees, especially in border areas and along key population movement routes.

Colombia situation

In Colombia, more than 44,000 people were affected by large-scale displacement in the first half of 2021¹ although some return movements took place during the same period. Certain

¹ According to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

regions, particularly the north-western part of Chocó, also saw a continued trend of community confinement by armed groups, overwhelmingly affecting indigenous and Afro-Colombian populations. Reduced access, partly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, posed further challenges for the humanitarian response and advancing solutions for IDPs. According to the National Victims Registry, almost 600,000 persons had been displaced since the signing of the peace agreement in 2016. With the recent 10-year extension of Law 1448: Victims and Land Restitution, the Victims' Unit continues to register and provide emergency response to those newly affected by displacement, while also working towards longer-term solutions. The Government implemented a strategy to strengthen civilian presence and local institutional capacity in conflict-affected areas. The humanitarian structure in the country was reviewed, with the establishment of a Humanitarian Advisory Team to support the efforts of the Resident Coordinator.

North of Central America situation

Violence, poverty and the effects of climate change drove close to 1 million persons to flee their homes in the north of Central America, including over 550,000 refugees and asylum-seekers from Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, as well as 318,000 IDPs within El Salvador and Honduras. In July, there were reports of over 212,000 persons arriving at the south-west border of the United States of America, which included some 19,000 unaccompanied children. Mexico registered 75,000 new asylum applications in the first eight months of 2021 alone.

The region experienced an increasing number of mixed and secondary movements, especially Haitians travelling from South America towards Mexico and the United States of America. Panama registered record numbers of mixed movements through the Darien Gap, mostly from Haiti. In Mexico, most asylum claims in July and August were from Haitians.

The multidimensional crisis affecting the subregion resulted in a significant increase of humanitarian needs, triggering humanitarian response plans in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. Almost 8.3 million persons across the three countries were in need of humanitarian assistance, representing a 60 per cent increase since early 2020.

UNHCR operational responses were scaled up in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico, helping advance the commitments of the comprehensive regional protection and solutions framework (known in the region by its Spanish acronym MIRPS) and national plans, in close coordination with humanitarian country teams, local authorities and communities.

Nicaragua situation

The complex socio-political situation in Nicaragua led to over 110,000 Nicaraguans being forced to flee their country since 2018, most of them seeking protection in Costa Rica. In 2021, the number of Nicaraguans seeking asylum in Costa Rica returned to pre-pandemic levels of an average of 4,400 per month and continued to increase.

UNHCR and partners supported host countries in responding to the growing needs of Nicaraguans seeking international protection by bolstering asylum systems, providing humanitarian assistance and promoting access to public services and the labour market.

B. Progress and challenges in achieving the regional strategic priorities

Operationalizing the global compact on refugees

Despite the severe socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Haiti, Mexico, Panama and Uruguay all progressed towards fulfilling their pledges made during the 2019 Global Refugee Forum and the high-level segment on statelessness which took place during the seventieth plenary session of the Executive Committee. UNHCR is supporting countries in their prioritization and stocktaking exercises.

Access to protection and strengthening asylum capacities

UNHCR remained concerned by the impact of public health restrictions on access to protection, as well as by expulsions carried out without appropriate screening and protection safeguards.

Despite this, some States strengthened asylum capacities and expanded regularization programmes to facilitate legal-stay arrangements. Simplified and accelerated registration and refugee status determination procedures significantly increased processing capacity in Brazil, Mexico, Uruguay and Paraguay. In Brazil, application of the broader refugee definition (according to the 1984 Cartagena Declaration on Refugees) for Venezuelan asylum-seekers was extended until 2022. In another positive development, more than 13,000 persons were readmitted to the United States of America from February to August through the Migrant Protection Protocol in Mexico, with support from UNHCR, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) to continue their migration and asylum procedures.

Colombia's decision to grant temporary protection status to Venezuelans on its territory benefited more than 1 million persons, who are now scheduled for biometric registration. By May 2021, some 43,000 individuals, including around 4,000 children, were registered in the Dominican Republic in its regularization programme. In June, Peru adopted guidelines for granting humanitarian migratory status to pending and rejected asylum-seekers. Foreigners (mainly Venezuelans) whose previous legal stay permit had expired or who had entered and remained in the country irregularly continued to be granted temporary residence permit cards. In Costa Rica, a temporary complementary protection category was added to provide legal status to certain Cubans, Nicaraguans and Venezuelans whose asylum applications were rejected. Argentina passed a regulation facilitating access to temporary residence for Venezuelan children by waiving the requirement for presentation of a valid identity document. In the United States of America, Venezuelans and nationals of Haiti and Myanmar already present on its territory were provided with temporary protection status for 18 months. Temporary protection status eligibility for Syrians was also expanded.

In May 2021, the Quito Process's Lima Chapter adopted a joint statement aimed at strengthening national asylum capacities, with the support of the Group of Friends of the Quito Process and the Asylum Capacity Support Group, and at developing complementary approaches.

Registration and household surveys

Despite operational challenges related to COVID-19, over 253,000 individuals were newly registered between January and August 2021 by UNHCR and 87 partners across 24 countries. The UNHCR population registration and identity management Eco-System (PRIMES) enabled the identification of persons, delivery of assistance, services and protection, facilitation of durable solutions and prevention of fraud.

In line with its global data transformation strategy, UNHCR supported 13 country offices in the standardization of high frequency surveys. UNHCR is now using multiple data collection methods to cover core regional questions as well as sustainable development goal indicators.

UNHCR worked, together with the Central American Integration System, to include forcibly displaced persons in national statistical systems. Honduras is piloting the implementation of the International Recommendations on IDP Statistics (IRIS) with the support of the World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement.

Child protection

UNHCR offered technical assistance to promote the inclusion of children in national protection systems. UNHCR together with IOM, the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNICEF, and UNHCR presented operational guidelines on determining the best interests of the child in the context of human mobility, which was endorsed by 11 countries. Through the Quito Process, UNICEF, IOM and UNHCR advocated the protection of Venezuelan children, resulting in a commitment to develop operational guidance on transnational cooperation in this area.

In Mexico, UNHCR, in coordination with UNICEF, supported the implementation of legal reforms to end child detention in migration contexts. UNHCR provided alternative care arrangements to 62 unaccompanied and separated children through specialized NGOs and offered case management for more than 400 children at risk, while around 16,600 children on the move had access to child-friendly spaces. In Colombia, UNHCR provided assistance to some 3,000 children at risk, including 520 unaccompanied and separated children. In Belize, UNHCR signed a memorandum of understanding with the Department of Youth Services to promote access to age-sensitive services, including protection from gender-based violence, for children seeking asylum.

Strengthening participatory and community-based approaches

As part of the roll-out of the 2020 UNHCR policy on the prevention of, risk mitigation and response to gender-based violence and in the framework of the “Safe from the Start” programme, Aruba, Brazil, Colombia, Curaçao, Guyana and Peru introduced innovative approaches to prevent gender-based violence and protect survivors. These included virtual community centres, strengthened safe houses, community-based support to persons affected by the sale and exchange of sex and the delivery of mental health and psychosocial support to indigenous populations. In Peru, UNHCR established a hotline and other remote services with specialized staff who assisted close to a 1000 survivors of gender-based violence, and in Colombia, UNHCR supported some 700 survivors. In Mexico, UNHCR identified and assisted over 550 survivors and referred some 160 survivors to a range of services. To combat sexual exploitation and abuse, training, materials and guidance are being developed to strengthen the capacity of partners, and efforts are being made to consolidate inter-agency collaboration at the national and regional levels.

Community engagement and participation throughout the region increased, and more than 300 organizations led by persons of concern were mapped. In Brazil, community radios reached out to indigenous peoples; in Honduras youth networks engaged with displaced youth through art and music. In El Salvador, a network of outreach volunteers promoted communication with communities. In Ecuador, YouTubers and influencers helped to disseminate prevention messages on the importance of the COVID-19 vaccine. At the regional level, assessments on the situation of older persons and the situation of persons with disabilities were launched with HelpAge International and the Latin American Network of Non-Governmental Organizations of Persons with Disabilities and their Families (RIADIS). The 202 structures of the support spaces network provided access to information and basic services, including safe identification and referrals of people with specific needs.

Education

In Brazil, the “UNESCO Qualification Passport” established by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) was, with the support of IOM and UNHCR, allowing refugees and migrants to access new educational opportunities and employment through recognition of their previous educational background, professional experiences and abilities. In Mexico, implementation of the Educate A Child programme promoted the inclusion of out-of-school children and adolescents in primary education. In Guyana, information materials on the right to access education was developed in coordination with the national authorities. In El Salvador, together with the Ministry of Education, UNHCR supported an accelerated learning programme for IDPs, as well as the renovation of four public schools for some 1,500 children.

Socioeconomic inclusion

In Brazil and Mexico, over 68,400 persons were relocated from regions where they had little prospect of economic integration to other parts of the country where they were matched to available jobs. In Colombia, UNHCR and the Government launched a pilot programme for employment-based relocation in July 2021.

In Colombia, UNHCR promoted livelihood initiatives and socioeconomic inclusion for Venezuelans who will receive temporary protection status through increased access to the labour markets and financial services. Colombia piloted the “graduation approach” and is

exploring how to scale up the intervention, including by leveraging private sector investment and donor financing through a social impact bond. In the Southern Cone, UNHCR is implementing a comprehensive 2020-2023 durable solutions strategy, with 14 projects underway: seven in Argentina, two in Paraguay and five in Uruguay.

Third country solutions

New pilot resettlement programmes were underway in Colombia and Peru, while UNHCR and partners took necessary measures to strengthen identification and processing capacity to address growing needs among the forcibly displaced. Another strategic priority is to expand complementary pathways of admission to third countries. Canada facilitated complementary pathways for skilled Venezuelan refugees in countries of the Andean region, while the United States of America considered similar schemes for other nationalities. Within the Quito Process, a regional study to facilitate family reunification was underway.

Ensuring protection and solutions for internally displaced persons

The Americas hosted more than 8.5 million IDPs, mostly in Colombia, El Salvador and Honduras. UNHCR co-led the protection cluster in El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras and contributed to ensuring the centrality of protection in the three recently developed humanitarian response plans, which covered a 17-month period from the second half of 2021 to end 2022.

In Honduras, UNHCR supported national and local governments to strengthen IDP governance, while advocating for the adoption of the law on the protection and assistance to internally displaced persons.

In El Salvador, UNHCR followed up on the implementation of the 2020 law on the protection of IDPs and worked with municipal authorities to improve IDP governance.

In Mexico, UNHCR is providing technical assistance in the development of a legal and policy framework for IDPs, currently under discussion in the Senate, as well as coordinating the inter-agency working group on IDPs. Jointly with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), UNHCR is contributing to the drafting of a handbook on internal displacement and assisting the Mexican Commission for the Defence and Promotion of Human Rights to compile data and analyse displacement trends. An IDP profiling exercise was also developed in Chihuahua with the Joint IDP Profiling Service, in coordination with the national authorities.

In Colombia, UNHCR reinforced its institutional response to conflict-affected populations through protection monitoring, advocacy, outreach and humanitarian assistance. The Office engaged directly with affected populations to promote community empowerment and facilitate dialogue with local and national authorities. UNHCR is working with the Victims Unit in strengthening the victims registry, supporting assistance in emergencies and the implementation of return and relocation plans, promoting support for victims abroad and supporting implementation of the recommendations by the Expert Group on Refugee and IDP Statistics. UNHCR is also working with the Ministry of the Interior to urgently put in place regional prevention and protection plans in Chocó, Nariño, Antioquia, Norte de Santander and Cauca to address structural risk factors that cause displacement.

Eradication of statelessness

Progress was made in Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Mexico and Panama towards fulfilling pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum to prevent and eradicate statelessness in the region. As of August 2021, through the Project "Primero la Niñez", over 63,000 children born in Colombia of Venezuelan parents received Colombian nationality. In Chile, children born on the territory who would otherwise be stateless were to be granted Chilean nationality. In Costa Rica, a new national database enhanced tracking, from application for stateless status to naturalization, and the streamlining of statelessness cases. As of July 2021, some 120 persons had been recognized as stateless and 102 cases were being examined.

The Dominican Republic adopted Decree 297-21 in April 2021, authorizing the naturalization of fifty individuals of Haitian descent. Since the adoption of Law 169- the total number of naturalized individuals of Haitian descent rose to some 800.

In May 2021, the Government of Mexico reformed Article 30 of its Constitution, allowing children born abroad to acquire Mexican citizenship if one or both parents were Mexican nationals. For the first time, Panama granted statelessness status to an individual as a result of its recently adopted statelessness determination procedures.

Strengthening inter-agency coordination, advocacy and partnerships, and mobilizing support

The Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform, co-led by UNHCR and IOM, oversaw the implementation of humanitarian, protection and socioeconomic integration assistance for Venezuelan refugees and migrants across 17 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Of the 3.3 million individuals targeted under the 2021 refugees and migrants’ response plan, some 1.8 million were reached by the end of June 2021.

The Government of Canada, UNHCR, IOM and the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform organized an international donors conference in solidarity with Venezuelan refugees and migrants. Some 36 donors pledged \$2.35 billion (including \$957 million in grants – a 45 per cent increase from last year – and \$1.4 billion in loans).

In June, the MIRPS support platform, headed by Spain in collaboration with Guatemala and Costa Rica, organized the first Solidarity Event for forcibly displaced persons and host communities in Central America and Mexico. The event increased international visibility of the displacement crisis across MIRPS countries and brought in new financial commitments. In July 2021, Canada took the leadership of the support platform from Spain, with protection and empowerment of women and girls on the move as its over-arching theme.

UNHCR further strengthened its partnerships with international financial institutions, in particular the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank.

C. Financial information

In October 2020, the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme approved a budget of \$573.8 million for the Americas for 2021. By the end of July 2021, the total budget for the Americas amounted to \$728.3 million, due to an increase of \$73.6 million from the 2021 supplementary budget relating to the protection and socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 and \$16 million for the implementation of temporary protection status for Venezuelans in Colombia. By the end of July, operational needs for the region were 47 per cent funded (\$342 million).
