



Argentina

Belize

Bolivia

Brazil

Chile

Colombia

Costa Rica

Ecuador

El Salvador

Guatemala

Guyana

Honduras

Mexico

Nicaragua

Panama

Paraguay

Peru

Suriname

Uruguay

Venezuela

Latin America (Mexico Plan of Action)

Working environment

Nine Latin American countries held presidential elections in 2006. It is hoped that in 2007 their new governments will engage in an effective dialogue on asylum matters, especially the implementation of the Mexico Plan of Action.

Mexico and all the Central American countries (Belize, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua) are signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. The region hosts close to 5,000 refugees and asylum-seekers, a number that has remained relatively stable in the past few years.

There has been progress towards the local integration of long-staying refugees. In Belize, El Salvador and Nicaragua, refugees received citizenship or permanent residence in the first half of 2006. In Guatemala, refugees have received driving licences and their refugee identity cards have been accepted for the purpose of opening bank accounts.

At the same time, the poor socio-economic conditions in most of these countries produce many economic migrants. In 2005, official figures say 245,000 people were intercepted and turned back from Mexico's southern border, but civil society organizations estimate that the real figure is 30 to 40 per cent higher. The vast



majority of undocumented migrants, who cross into Mexico largely with the aim of reaching the United States or Canada, come from Central America.

At the time of writing, it was not clear if the volatile political situation in post-election Mexico would affect the governmental refugee agency. Nonetheless, UNHCR hopes to pursue its goals in the country as planned. The same applies to Nicaragua, where presidential elections are due at the end of 2006. In both countries, a change of government may require building new capacity in governmental institutions and new cooperation agreements based on the Mexico Plan of Action.

In southern Latin America (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay), favourable attitudes towards human rights issues are likely to sustain the governments' receptivity to refugee matters, including their commitment to the Mexico Plan of Action and its resettlement component. However, upcoming presidential elections in Argentina and Paraguay and internal problems in Bolivia mean that UNHCR will have to redouble efforts to keep refugee issues high on national agendas in 2007.

There are relatively few refugees and asylum-seekers in southern Latin America, but the number is rising

steadily. This is particularly true in Chile, where the flow of refugees, mostly Colombians, has increased by 40 per cent in one year. UNHCR estimates that given current arrival trends, more than 2,300 people will ask for asylum in the region in 2007. Of these, more than 80 per cent will be Colombians.

Strategy

The Mexico Plan of Action, adopted by 20 governments, is a continent-wide framework for the protection of displaced people. By adopting the Plan, governments have committed themselves to strengthening refugee protection and implementing an integrated approach to durable solutions.

The Plan has three main pillars for finding durable solutions: Borders of Solidarity; Cities of Solidarity; and Resettlement in Solidarity. The first pillar strives to assist both refugees and local host communities in border areas to coexist. Under this pillar, UNHCR supports several small projects such as the construction of water supply systems and the repair of school buildings and health centres. The second pillar caters to the vast majority of displaced people living in urban areas. This pillar advocates local integration through self-reliance by providing

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job placements, vocational training, community-based childcare centres and microcredit schemes. The third pillar is a regional resettlement programme that seeks durable solutions for Colombian refugees in Ecuador and Costa Rica by resettling them in other countries in the continent.

In 2006, the most notable achievements under the Plan were the signing of agreements with major cities to ensure that the displaced are granted their basic rights and social benefits, as well as an increase in resettlement opportunities within the region.

In Mexico and Central America, UNHCR's primary objectives are to promote the naturalization of long-staying refugees and to ensure the protection of refugees within broader migratory flows, in particular by monitoring the southern border of Mexico and strengthening national asylum systems.

UNHCR will work with government counterparts to establish comprehensive legal frameworks for refugee protection. It is crucial to ensure that refugee protection is adequately addressed despite considerations of security and migration control. UNHCR will be active in regional discussions on migration, including the Puebla Process conference, to ensure that asylum remains on the agenda despite ever-stricter measures to control irregular migratory movements.

In southern Latin America, UNHCR will expand the intra-regional resettlement programme for Latin American refugees. Other objectives are to strengthen asylum legislation and the work of eligibility commissions; to monitor sensitive border areas; and to train border officials in identifying those in need of international protection within broader migration movements. UNHCR's objective in Brazil is to reach a purely supervisory role while government and civil society actors assume operational and financial responsibility for refugee protection.

Constraints

Although new refugee legislation has been drafted with UNHCR's support in Mexico and Nicaragua, elections in 2006 make it unlikely that the laws will be passed soon.

The regional resettlement programme has been affected by a lack of long-term financial support. Financial commitments have not covered the 12 months of integration assistance that are deemed necessary to help refugees adjust to their new lives.

Operations

The countries that form part of the Colombia Situation (i.e. **Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela**) are described in a separate chapter.

In **Mexico** and **Central America**, the age, gender and diversity mainstreaming strategy has been fully implemented and the protection risks of vulnerable people identified. Assessments conducted with the participation of displaced people have provided important inputs for UNHCR and its implementing partners.

In Mexico, microcredit projects for refugee women were shown to be a key element in the integration of refugee families. In 2007, UNHCR will increase support for microcredit projects in order to aid self-reliance. The Office will also continue to provide legal assistance for refugees. Training and other capacity-building activities, including raising awareness on gender-based persecution, will aim to reinforce protection skills in the region. These activities will be targeted particularly at asylum officers and members of the national refugee commissions.

UNHCR's field presence in Tapachula, the principal border crossing in southern Mexico, continues to be of critical importance to ensure that asylum-seekers within mixed migratory flows have access to international protection. There are many unaccompanied children within this group who are vulnerable to human rights violations, often at the hands of smugglers and traffickers. As such, a priority for UNHCR in 2007 will be improving the protection of children in mixed migratory flows. The Office is working with Mexico's migration authorities, Foreign Ministry and civil society actors on the legal, institutional and social aspects of child protection. Initial results of this cooperation, obtained through the secondment of a Child Protection Officer to Tapachula, have been encouraging as the topic is starting to gain interest. A first step has been taken to create an inter-agency working group on the issue.

In **Brazil**, the participatory assessment carried out among urban refugees confirms that there are considerable differences in their ability to integrate depending on their origin, age, gender and geographical location. But common to most refugees are the problems of finding jobs and affordable housing. This is particularly the case in big cities such as São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, where more than half of the refugees in the country live. In 2007, UNHCR will sharpen its focus on income-generating activities. It will also establish crucial partnerships with public entities and civil society organizations in the smaller urban centres closer to refugee entry points where the potential for integration seems to be greater.



Brazil has emerged as one of the main resettlement countries in Latin America. *UNHCR/G. Gutarra*

The resettlement programme in Brazil is the only one in Latin America that makes provision for emergency referrals and has a special project for women at risk. The Office will further consolidate the regional resettlement programme in country. In light of the positive results of a decentralized resettlement strategy, UNHCR will refer resettlement requests to a variety of municipalities. With its partners, the Office will establish alliances with public and private actors to build reception and integration infrastructure.

There is an increasing number of Colombians in the Amazon region who are believed to be in need of international protection. UNHCR will strengthen alliances with local authorities and NGOs to help this population.

UNHCR's Regional Office in **Argentina**, which also covers **Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay** and **Uruguay**, will strengthen the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers. It will promote the adoption of national refugee laws in Argentina and Uruguay and the introduction of a new draft law in Chile. In Argentina and Uruguay, the laws have already passed one chamber, but require the approval of the other one. UNHCR hopes that, the laws will be passed before the end of 2006. The Office will

also seek to improve the functioning of national refugee commissions in Bolivia, Chile and Uruguay. It will also strengthen national and regional protection networks, which are of particular importance in border areas.

In Argentina and Chile, refugees have difficulty finding jobs and housing. UNHCR will help them attain self-reliance, in particular by supporting micro-businesses and job placement. In Bolivia, the Office will help train national authorities, establish registration and documentation mechanisms and strengthen the National Refugee Commission.

UNHCR will also consolidate the regional resettlement programme in order to improve reception and local integration infrastructure. The experience of the first refugees to be resettled in Argentina and Chile reveals that integration is more successful in smaller urban centres than in big cities. Accordingly, alliances will be sought with municipal authorities in Chile (e.g. Arica, Antofagasta, Iquique and Calama) to expand and decentralize resettlement areas. These alliances will also benefit the increasing number of refugees arriving in northern Chile.

Budget (USD)				
Country	2006	2007		
	AB	AB	SB	Total
Argentina regional office ¹	2,322,652	2,302,621	0	2,302,621
Brazil	1,787,569	2,353,162	0	2,353,162
Colombia ²	8,443,625	353,362	13,255,230	13,608,592
Costa Rica	1,705,293	1,926,507	0	1,926,507
Ecuador	3,944,085	4,446,802	0	4,446,802
Mexico regional office ³	2,765,089	2,281,010	0	2,281,010
Panama	857,493	847,304	0	847,304
Venezuela regional office ⁴	2,941,696	3,045,617	0	3,045,617
Total	24,767,502	17,556,385	13,255,230	30,811,615

¹ Includes local integration in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay, as well as resettlement in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay.

² In 2007, the requirements for internally displaced people in Colombia are presented in a Supplementary Programme Budget.

³ Includes local integration in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Belize.

⁴ Includes local integration in Northern South America.

