

CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

By the end of the year, UNHCR had assisted about 4,400 refugees and persons in a refugee-like situation in the sub-region. This constituted an increase of 35 per cent over 1998. Geographical barriers and the presence of armed groups have complicated access to asylum. However, the number of refugees and asylum-seekers in both Panama, Venezuela and Ecuador remained low compared to the number of IDPs in Colombia.

UNHCR pursued negotiations with the new Government of Panama to secure more flexible application of the temporary humanitarian status set forth in its Decree No. 23. UNHCR urged the Government to consider amending Section II of this decree to ensure consistency with international protection standards. The new Government showed a more liberal attitude towards Colombian refugees and asylum-seekers, granting them temporary protection without exerting undue pressure for early return. UNHCR continued to offer its advisory services and to urge that any bilateral agreements regarding return should adhere to international standards of refugee protection.

PROGRESS TOWARDS SOLUTIONS

UNHCR provided technical expertise and material support to the national eligibility commissions in the sub-region to ensure consistent application of guidelines on the treatment of refugees. Monitoring of the borders led to increased knowledge of cross-border movements. As an integral part of its strategy for building up a protection network, UNHCR strengthened partnerships with academic institutions, NGOs and the Catholic Church in the sub-region. The Office also supported bilateral meetings between Catholic parishes located in areas along the border with Colombia. Participants had an opportunity to exchange information on the border situation and make arrangements for new arrivals.

To better protect and assist refugees and others of concern, UNHCR decided to expand its presence in the sub-region in 1999. An office was opened in Ecuador in November. In addition, the Government of Venezuela agreed to the establishment of a UNHCR field presence in San Cristobal, on the border with Colombia.

OPERATIONS

The arrival in **Venezuela** of 3,500 Colombians in June 1999 starkly illustrated the regional implications of the Colombian conflict. UNHCR helped the Government to set up an Inter-Ministerial Technical Commission, responsible for the co-ordination of all activities related to Colombian arrivals. One of the Commission's main achievements was the adoption of provisional procedures to address refugee issues—including documentation, migratory and work permits— pending the enactment of national legislation on asylum. For the first time, national institutions assumed responsibility for the determination of refugee status. The Attorney General's office was entrusted with the processing of claims. UNHCR provided technical advice on the drafting of the provisions on asylum contained in the new Constitution. Transitional provision IV.2 requires the State of Venezuela to enact refugee legislation before the end of 2000. To this end, a Refugee Commission was set up by the Government, with the participation of UNHCR and the newly appointed Ombudsman. Several training courses on human rights and refugee law were held for members of the Venezuelan Armed Forces.

In **Ecuador**, despite the country's socio-political and economic crisis, asylum policies were implemented in line with international standards. Refugee protection was improved, as a consequence of implementation - with UNHCR's support - of the Government's Human Rights Plan, which contains a chapter devoted to foreigners, migrants and refugees. A documentation project was implemented in the provinces of Carchi and Sucumbíos, benefiting some 1,300 Colombians living in a refugee-like situation in border areas enjoying close family links with Ecuador. UNHCR promoted the reactivation of a bilateral migratory agreement between the Governments of Colombia and Ecuador, whereby a national of one country is allowed to reside and obtain documentation (including a work permit) in the other. Ninety senior police officers and 1,412 policemen received training on international refugee law. Other operational partners received direct practical support in the form of a series of operational workshops. In Sucumbíos, health and education facilities were renovated and educational materials were distributed.

UNHCR's operations in **Colombia** included the promotion of a common inter-agency approach to IDPs and the consolidation of UNHCR's presence. In November 1999 the Inter-Agency Standing Committee meeting in Geneva formally entrusted UNHCR in

Colombia with the role of co-ordinator among UN agencies for displacement issues. For details of UNHCR's work in Colombia, please see the section entitled "Supporting IDPs in Colombia".

In **Panama**, temporary protection status was granted to some 550 persons who entered the country in December 1999 and settled in Jaqué, Biroquerá and Coclito. Emergency assistance was given to this group with the support of the local parish. Local inhabitants in need also benefited from some material assistance.

SUPPORTING IDPs IN COLOMBIA

UNHCR's Operational Plan for Colombia covers the period from July 1999 to June 2002. The plan aims to strengthen the national institutional framework for internally displaced persons (IDPs) in line with international principles of protection, and to contribute to peace initiatives in the country by ensuring that political initiatives in favour of the peace process and humanitarian action are mutually reinforcing. UNHCR's work in 1999 can be summarised as follows:

- **Overall Institutional Framework:** UNHCR co-funded and provided expertise for the creation of a Joint Technical Unit (JTU) as part of the Red de Solidaridad (RSS), which is the government entity designated to deal with IDPs. One of the main tasks of the JTU was to develop a National Registration System for IDPs, based on UNHCR's guidelines and standards. A pilot project to test the new system was implemented in three priority areas prior to the launch of a new, wider registration system in 2000. To promote IDP access to personal documentation, a training and information programme was carried out jointly with national and international partners for the benefit of national registry officers in four different regions. The critical needs of IDP children (estimated at 55 per cent of the IDP population) were highlighted through a UNHCR-financed inter-institutional initiative led by the NGO Defensoría de los Niños. Three regional workshops identified the most pressing problems faced by IDP children, such as access to education, health services and social integration in the broadest sense.
- **Prevention:** To encourage early intervention by the State to prevent forced displacement, UNHCR participated in missions to risk zones alongside representatives of various government institutions. UNHCR also worked to sensitise the armed forces and the police to their role in preventing displacement and providing protection to those already displaced. A workshop was held involving 26 senior officers, and guidelines were produced for distribution by the Ministry of Defence.
- **Emergency Response:** To harmonise standards and criteria for the provision of emergency aid to IDPs, a working group was created consisting of the RSS, UNHCR, ICRC, Pastoral Social and ECHO. The group evaluated field experience in three locations, agreed on co-ordination mechanisms and reviewed current practices. Information on contingency planning and emergency management techniques was provided in a UNHCR-sponsored emergency management workshop involving central and local level representatives from the RSS and NGOs.
- **Solutions:** With expert help from UNHCR, the RSS/JTU completed the design of a pilot project, to be implemented in 2000 in Apartado, which is expected to help local counterparts improve the effectiveness of reintegration projects for IDPs. A survey of IDP women and land issues was partially financed by UNHCR. A strategy submitted to the Government and NGOs included micro-projects designed to assist women heads of household.
- **Advocacy and Dissemination:** To encourage public awareness of the plight of IDPs, UNHCR established contact with the local media and arranged regular meetings with national journalists and other public figures. As a result, the national media began to provide broader coverage of IDP issues. UNHCR also lent support to the National Ombudsman's Office for the translation and printing of the "Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement".



SOUTHERN SOUTH AMERICA

Argentina
BoliviaBrazil
ChileParaguay
Uruguay

MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS

The deterioration of the political situation in Bolivia and the fragile balance of power in Paraguay raised concerns about the likelihood of asylum-seekers arriving from these countries. Mounting insecurity in Colombia and Peru led to a steady arrival of Colombian and Peruvian asylum-seekers in the countries in the Southern Cone. Presidential elections in Argentina in October and in Chile in December polarised the political climate and affected UNHCR's activities as a whole. The detention of the former Chilean leader, General Pinochet, and the arrest of military officials in various countries re-opened the debate on unresolved human rights violations.

CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

Most countries in the region remained unable to assume full responsibility for refugee protection due to weak institutional capacity. A major economic downturn affecting Southern Cone countries hampered UNHCR's efforts to promote the self-reliance of refugees there. In most countries, changes in government as a result of elections also affected the implementation of programmes, as the passage or amendment of refugee-related legislation was postponed, pending endorsement by the newly elected governments.

PROGRESS TOWARDS SOLUTIONS

In August 1999, an agreement was signed between UNHCR and the Brazilian Justice Minister to initiate a resettlement project in 2000. This is the second programme of its kind and follows the example of Chile.

The National Registry of Persons in Argentina implemented Parliamentary Resolution No. 1192 whereby refugees are exempted from the requirement to submit birth certificates for the issuance of national identity documents. Similarly, the Ministry of Culture and Education implemented Parliamentary Resolution No. 2575, which establishes that refugees can enrol in and

graduate from educational institutions even when unable to fulfil documentation formalities.

Civil society has increasingly become involved in the search for solutions for refugees. In Argentina and Brazil, for example, about 30 per cent of the costs of refugee assistance were met by institutions within civil society.

OPERATIONS

Most governments in Southern South America continued to apply liberal asylum policies. Technical and financial support was given to 12 governmental institutions responsible for establishing refugee policies and procedures for the determination of refugee status as well as to 14 NGO partners in the six countries covered by the Regional Office in Buenos Aires.

In 1999, two drafts of refugee legislation were under consideration by the Parliament in **Argentina**, although decisions were postponed until the swearing in of a new Parliament in 2000. Fifteen co-operation agreements were concluded with governmental institutions and NGOs to include refugees in national programmes in the areas of mental and physical health, housing, vocational and language training. These programmes, whose ultimate aim is self-sufficiency for refugees, complement the assistance provided by UNHCR and are fully funded by the State and civil society. Efforts to raise public awareness and build a constituency of support for refugees in Argentina continued to show positive results. The foundation *Argentina con ACNUR* organised numerous public awareness activities such as a joint UNHCR/UNICEF fund-raising event for Kosovo, as well as extensive press and publicity coverage of UNHCR's activities and humanitarian operations.

Despite economic and political challenges, **Brazil** continued to demonstrate a generous attitude towards refugees and asylum-seekers. Two main factors are at work: firstly, the institutional and legal framework enabled the Government to apply international refugee standards; but equally significant, is the effective working partnership between the Government, civil

society, and UNHCR. With the support of the UNHCR office in Buenos Aires, the Brazilian National Commission for Refugees is gradually acquiring the necessary expertise to deal with refugee claims. Working with the Government, it co-ordinated programmes to facilitate the local integration of refugees. Within civil society, CARITAS assumed a leading role for the local integration of refugees. In co-ordination with UNHCR, CARITAS signed co-operation agreements with institutions such as the Brazilian Bar Association, hospitals, and trade unions. Similarly, UNHCR signed an agreement with the Industrial Federation of Brazil, through which refugees benefited from social and economic programmes. More than 300 refugees attended vocational training courses at no cost to UNHCR.

Following the signing of a resettlement agreement in early 1999, a first group of refugees from South-Eastern Europe arrived in **Chile** in June. This allowed UNHCR to raise awareness of refugee issues among public institutions. In an ongoing learning process, the Government of Chile, in co-operation with UNHCR, undertook measures to improve the selection process, expedite documentation, provide education and vocational training, identify employment, provide and improve housing, and provide health coverage under the national health service.

In **Bolivia**, a Secretariat for eligibility issues was established to improve procedures for the determination of refugee status. In **Paraguay**, UNHCR provided technical advice on the drafting of the national law implementing the 1951 Convention. In **Uruguay**, UNHCR promoted the creation of a working group (involving the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and human rights NGOs) to draft a new refugee law. The draft is presently under consideration by the Senate.

FUNDING

UNHCR's work in South America was mainly covered under General Programmes. An overall funding shortfall for these programmes in 1999 hampered the Office's ability to meet the needs of refugees and others of concern in the region. However, UNHCR's public awareness activities yielded positive results, and special efforts were made to attract the interest of the private sector, including well-known personalities who could assist in future fund-raising campaigns. UNHCR's Operational Plan for internally displaced persons in Colombia, presented to the international community in April 1999, drew broad donor support. As the programme – which was resourced under a Trust Fund – experienced some delays in implementation, contributions were sufficient to cover needs until the end of the year.



Voluntary Contributions - Earmarked (USD)

Donor	Earmarking*	Special Programmes/OTF	
		Income	Contribution
Northern South America			
NORWAY			
	Colombia	64,350	64,350
SPAIN			
	Colombia	218,354	218,354
SWEDEN			
	Colombia	202,115	202,115
TOTAL**		484,819	484,819

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

** Total funds available for obligation in the region also included unearmarked voluntary contributions, lightly earmarked contributions, opening balances and adjustments.

There were no earmarked voluntary contributions for Southern South America.

Budget and Expenditure (USD)

Northern South America Country	Working Budget*		Expenditure*	
	General Programmes	Special Programmes	General Programmes	Special Programmes
Colombia	727,851	317,954	592,375	282,100
Ecuador	121,376	0	118,606	0
Panama	91,586	0	91,527	0
Peru	6,969	0	6,600	0
Venezuela	1,500,390	0	1,487,993	0
Southern South America				
Country				
Argentina	1,184,947	72,500	1,163,637	68,000
Regional Projects	3,320,335	134,065	2,856,310	100,000
TOTAL	6,953,454	524,519	6,317,049	450,100

* Figures do not include costs at Headquarters.