

Update on UNHCR’s operations in the Americas

A. Situational context including new developments

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has been particularly acute in the Americas region as the most recent epicentre of the disease. More than 15.7 million cases and nearly 537,000 deaths have been reported, affecting increasing numbers of persons of concern to UNHCR. Containment measures, such as border closures and lengthy quarantine requirements, have had severe implications throughout the region and many people are struggling to meet their basic needs. This difficult context has resulted in refugees, migrants and internally displaced persons (IDPs) being impacted in a disproportionate manner.

Venezuela situation

The 5.1 million refugees and migrants from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) make up the second-largest displaced group in the world. Approximately 83 per cent are in host countries in Latin America and the Caribbean that have collectively granted more than 2.5 million residency and other regular stay permits, registered over 800,000 asylum claims and recognized over 100,000 refugees.

Since March 2020, border closures related to COVID-19 have temporarily reduced or halted regular outflows, onward population movements, and in-country mobility to a fraction of prior trends. Meanwhile, refugees and migrants resorting to irregular means of travel have grown, with heightened risks of trafficking and exploitation. Containment measures have battered the economy, particularly in informal sectors where large percentages of refugees and migrants find employment. As a result, a rapidly growing number of Venezuelans have lost their source of income and face difficult circumstances which can lead to negative coping mechanisms. Some have been compelled to return to Venezuela despite serious protection risks. Since the onset of the pandemic, more than 100,000 Venezuelans have spontaneously returned, putting pressure on Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of)’s capacity to implement health protocols when receiving its returning citizens.

The Government of Spain and the European Union hosted the International Donors Conference in Solidarity with Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in May 2020, co-convened by Canada and Norway with the support of UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). The conference mobilized \$2.79 billion in pledges, including \$653 million in grants for host governments and the Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP), benefitting both Venezuelans and host communities. The RMRP was revised to incorporate \$438.4 million within the COVID-19 Global Humanitarian Response Plan, bringing the total appeal to \$1.41 billion. By 30 June 2020, partner organizations within the RMRP had reached 1.7 million (36 per cent) of the targeted beneficiaries.

The sixth round of the Quito Process, the principal regional coordination forum between governments hosting Venezuelans, took place late September 2020 under Chile’s pro-tempore leadership. The agenda included socio-economic integration, education, health, asylum, and human trafficking, among others, through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on the region. A joint declaration was adopted and signed by 13 States. Peru was confirmed for the next pro-tempore Presidency and a Group of Friends of the Quito Process was formally established.

In Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), UNHCR continues to contribute to the implementation of the Humanitarian Response Plan which identifies 7 million persons in need and aims to assist 4.5 million women, men, girls and boys. The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded pre-existing needs resulting in the High-Level Humanitarian Donors Roundtable on Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) in September 2020, organized by Sweden, to mobilize additional international support for the humanitarian response taking into account the impact of the pandemic.

North of Central America situation

Violence and deepening poverty have forced some 720,000 people to flee their homes in the north of Central America (NCA) as of the end of 2019. Almost half are now displaced within their own country, including some 247,000 people in Honduras and some 71,500 in El Salvador. Others have fled across borders.

The effects of the pandemic have been particularly severe in the NCA region. With limited public health systems, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras each pursued strong measures to control the virus, including the closure of borders and restrictions on mobility. Such measures have reduced population flows, without resolving the underlying causes for flight. UNHCR therefore expects a rapid increase in forced displacement when containment measures are lifted.

In addition, mobility restrictions have resulted in the loss of livelihoods for many displaced and vulnerable people. As businesses close and informal jobs are lost, vulnerable communities are left without sources of income and become more reliant on humanitarian assistance. The pandemic has also increased the demand for basic needs and services, such as running water and health care, unavailable to many of the most vulnerable people.

Through the comprehensive regional protection and solutions framework, known in the region by its Spanish acronym MIRPS, Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Panama have furthered a collective response to forced displacement in Central America. Under El Salvador's pro-tempore Presidency in 2020, participating States have implemented a progressive agenda through their respective MIRPS national action plans. El Salvador, Honduras and Mexico established a MIRPS working group on internal displacement to share best practices, review the use of operational tools and systems, and develop policy recommendations for protection and solutions. Spain assumed in June the pro-tempore Presidency of the MIRPS Support Platform following its launch at the end 2019 and will be replaced by Canada in June 2021. The Platform is now managing technical cooperation requests from MIRPS States to strengthen their national asylum capacity.

In Mexico, UNHCR scaled up protection and assistance including through continued support for the Mexican Commission for Refugee Assistance to increase its registration capacities and simplify the processing of asylum claims. Crucially, the registration of asylum claims has continued throughout the pandemic. Due to difficult economic and sanitary conditions in the southern states, secondary movements of refugees and asylum-seekers towards the northern parts of the country, primarily the state of Nuevo León, are on the rise. COVID-19 has also led to the postponement of court hearings under the Migrant Protection Protocol (MPP) in the United States, fuelling anxiety among those who await their hearings in border areas of northern Mexico.

More restrictive asylum policies in the United States have led to increased barriers for people in need of international protection. Countries in the north of Central America continue to see many forced returns, both from the United States and Mexico, since the start of the pandemic.

Nicaragua Situation

Since political unrest and socio-economic issues began in April 2018, nearly 108,000 Nicaraguans have fled their homes, with 85 per cent seeking safety in Central America and Mexico. Costa Rica alone hosts nearly 80 per cent of all Nicaraguan refugees and asylum-seekers, amounting to some 81,000 people. With 59,200 new asylum claims in 2019, Costa Rica is among the top ten countries in the world that received new claims that year. The political dialogue in Nicaragua has stalled, and COVID-19 has compounded the crisis; the

United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) forecasts a reduction of its gross domestic product by 8.3 per cent in 2020. However, more Nicaraguans are returning, primarily owing to the socio-economic crisis resulting from the pandemic. Throughout the region, and despite the efforts of governments, Nicaraguan refugees face grave challenges, including loss of livelihoods, eviction and hunger.

Colombia situation

Internal displacement continues inside Colombia, despite the Government's efforts to advance solutions for IDPs. In August 2020, the United Nations Country Team expressed concern with regard to increasing situations of violence, including a rising number of reported massacres of, in most cases, young people. At the end of July, group displacements (over 50 people) have uprooted more than 16,400 people, while many more families had individually fled conflict and violence. Since the signing of the 2016 peace agreement between the Government of Colombia and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia–People's Army (FARC-EP) in 2016, more than 450,000 people have been newly displaced. The most affected areas are along the borders with Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) and Ecuador, as well as the Pacific coast. The onset of COVID-19 has significantly limited humanitarian access and worsened risks of confinement by irregular armed groups, affecting 45,700 persons across the country.

UNHCR leads the protection cluster and, in the framework of the recently signed United Nations sustainable development cooperation framework (UNSDCF), will work with national institutions and local communities to enhance access to rights for IDPs and confined communities. UNHCR also works towards long-term solutions, including through providing technical assistance to the Special Jurisdiction for Peace and the Truth Commission in their pursuit of justice for victims of human rights violations. In addition, the Office has helped national and local authorities include IDPs in their COVID-19 response.

B. Regional strategic priorities

The regional response to the COVID-19 pandemic

UNHCR operations reacted quickly to the COVID-19 crisis with emergency assistance, protection and engagement with various stakeholders to seek longer-term solutions. UNHCR further supported the efforts of refugee and host communities to minimize transmission of the virus by placing an emphasis on: i) information-sharing; ii) specialized protection services; iii) access to health care, water, sanitation and hygiene; iv) food security and nutrition; v) cash-based interventions; and vi) temporary shelter. UNHCR quickly transformed its service delivery methods to remote services in order to prevent the risk of transmission, setting up identity-checking and anti-fraud mechanisms. In support of national health care responses, UNHCR procured 426,000 medical masks for medical staff, first responders, people on the move and host communities. It further donated 2,372 refugee housing units to medical facilities, migratory reception areas or shelters to facilitate containment measures in Argentina, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Guyana, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Peru and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of). In Boa Vista, Brazil, UNHCR provided assistance with building a field hospital to serve up to 2,270 people including Brazilians, refugees and migrants alike. Throughout the region, 21,000 people have received mental health and psychosocial support through UNHCR's partners since the onset of the pandemic. In Costa Rica, in partnership with the Government, UNHCR provided financial support to enrol 6,000 refugees in health insurance this year.

In order to increase the self-reliance of refugee and IDP communities, UNHCR ramped up its delivery of cash assistance and helped local governments increase their shelter capacities, particularly in border areas. Over 70,000 people received cash or voucher transfers to meet their basic needs—such as food, rent or housing—accessing them remotely through newly established mechanisms. More than 14,000 people, either on the move or evicted from their homes, entered UNHCR-supported communal shelters or collective centres. At the same time, Brazil opened new shelters in the cities of Manaus and Belém do Pará in aid of the indigenous Warao communities displaced in the country. In Honduras, UNHCR supported Government reception facilities alongside IOM. The Office further promoted the inclusion of refugees in

moratoriums on evictions and reinforced cooperation with Ombudsmen and Public Defender Offices to ensure access to information on, and support in, challenging and unlawful evictions.

UNHCR provided health and legal information to persons of concern, with stepped-up online remote services during the lockdowns. The online site help.unhcr.org provides information on 24 countries of interest for refugees, asylum-seekers and stateless people, and some 1.3 million people have been informed through various remote mechanisms (e.g. instant messaging, help lines and social media). Information was also shared, and referrals provided, in Support Spaces, a regional inter-agency initiative co-led by UNHCR and the Norwegian Refugee Council with 167 structures across six countries in the context of the Venezuela situation. UNHCR helped share videos, songs, social cards, and posters—developed and disseminated by youth groups, “YouTubers” and other community influencers—in different languages and formats.

Protection and specific needs

UNHCR has developed COVID-19-specific protection guidance in a range of areas, including: registration, livelihoods, refugee status determination, shelter, access to territory, documentation, mental health and psychosocial support, as well as pertaining to the needs of specific groups (e.g. persons with disabilities, older persons, LGBTI+ persons, those with HIV and children). In collaboration with regional child protection actors, the Office facilitated the regional release of the “Minimum standards for child protection in humanitarian action”, with a new emphasis in the context of refugees, displacement and migration. UNHCR further provides technical support to the Quito Process with regard to orientation and reception centres, trafficking and smuggling, education, child protection registration, access to asylum procedures, and family reunification.

Access to asylum

In 2019, the Americas and the Caribbean received more asylum applications than any other region. The deteriorating situation in Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) and increased violence and insecurity in parts of Central America, as well as in Colombia, has led to a significant rise in the number of new claims. Close to 1 million asylum claims were recorded in 2019, and the United States of America became the world’s largest recipient of new applications (301,000), followed by Peru (259,800). Currently, the Americas hosts an estimated 2 million asylum-seekers.

Most asylum systems in the region remain overwhelmed, despite the efforts of States in this regard. Due to considerations related to the pandemic, the majority of countries have partially or completely closed their borders and banned the entry of non-resident foreigners. Such measures often lack the flexibility to allow entry to seek asylum or on other humanitarian grounds. At present, few countries allow asylum-seekers to enter their territory.

COVID-19-related restrictions on movement and accompanying measures reduced, suspended or postponed asylum procedures, eligibility interviews, registration services and documentation appointments. Notably, some countries adapted to remote mechanisms for registration and refugee status determination interviews and/or extended the validity of personal documentation for asylum-seekers.

To meet the challenges of the pandemic, UNHCR has helped States incorporate remote modalities into their asylum systems. For example, in Peru, 30,280 asylum-seekers had access to remote asylum applications. UNHCR additionally promoted the inclusion of persons of concern in national COVID-19 responses, including through residency permits, humanitarian visas and special temporary arrangements that meet a minimum protection threshold (i.e. legality, accessibility, access to basic rights and guarantee of non-return). Refugee status determination processes were also simplified or accelerated, including group-based recognition such as in Brazil, where 46,000 refugees were recognized on a prima facie basis.

Comprehensive solutions

UNHCR has reinforced its advocacy to promote access to health care, social protection and/or social stimulus programmes, particularly within pandemic responses. As a result, refugees and

asylum-seekers benefitted from national and local food distributions in Colombia, Costa Rica and Panama, while Brazil includes persons of concern in the Government's social emergency cash transfers.

UNHCR also issued a new global and regional livelihoods strategy with an emphasis on the inclusion of persons of concern in national policies, and on leveraging the pivotal role that local authorities can play in socio-economic inclusion. With support from the European Union, UNHCR, together with IOM and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), initiated a joint multi-year project with regard to inclusive cities for refugees and migrants in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador and Peru.

Resettlement continues to be a vital, though limited, tool for protection and durable solutions for some of the most vulnerable refugees in the Americas region. Its strategic use remains essential in order to demonstrate international solidarity and responsibility-sharing with countries affected by large-scale movements. In 2019, the number of resettlement submissions from the region to eleven resettlement countries increased to over 2,000. Despite the pandemic, UNHCR continued to identify, process and refer cases for resettlement and under protection transfer arrangements in NCA countries, resulting in submissions to resettlement countries for over 400 people. New pilot resettlement programmes are being developed for Venezuelan refugees in Colombia and Peru in collaboration with Australia. Additional third-country solutions, involving employment and education schemes, are being explored with Canada to facilitate complementary pathways for skilled Venezuelan refugees in countries of the Andean region. Canada also announced the opening of pathways to permanent residency for asylum-seekers in the health-care sector who have worked on the frontlines of the country's COVID-19 response.

UNHCR supports Argentina and Brazil's enhanced community sponsorship programmes to welcome resettled refugees. Work continues to expand solutions to third countries such as Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, in keeping with UNHCR's three-year strategy on resettlement and complementary pathways, and related pledges made at the Global Refugee Forum.

Eradication of statelessness

Regional efforts to prevent and eradicate statelessness progressed in Colombia and the Dominican Republic. In Colombia, an executive decree and a law passed in 2019 established a special temporary regime for birth acquisition of Colombian nationality to more than 47,000 children born within Colombia to Venezuelan parents, regardless of their legal status. This temporary measure remains vital to preventing statelessness, and UNHCR worked with refugees and Colombian authorities to ensure its effective implementation. The Colombian Parliament also approved a new migration policy that refers to the further development of a statelessness determination procedure.

UNHCR welcomed the Dominican Republic's executive decree 262-20 granting Dominican nationality to 750 persons of Haitian descent, including 467 children. The Office reaffirms its commitment to work with the authorities and affected communities in the implementation of this decree.

Costa Rica and Ecuador adapted their statelessness determination procedures to continue to operate remotely. In addition, UNHCR, The Latin American and Caribbean Council of Civil Registry, Identity and Vital Statistics (CLARCIEV) and the Organization of American States (OAS) are advancing a joint regional study with recommendations on late birth registration.

Partnerships and inter-agency coordination

UNHCR and IOM continue to co-lead the regional and national platforms for Venezuelan refugees and migrants and provide for the joint secretariat of the Quito Process. In Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), within the framework of the Humanitarian Response Plan, the Office continues to lead the coordination of and operational delivery for the protection and shelter/non-food items/energy clusters. UNHCR also contributed to the MIRPS framework, helping to expand the base of support together with OAS through the MIRPS Support Platform. In Colombia, UNHCR continues to lead the protection cluster as part of the inter-agency IDP response.

The Office’s catalytic role in multilateral mechanisms includes those led by Governments (e.g. the Brazil Plan of Action and the Regional Conferences on Migration); United Nations (UN) fora (e.g. issue-based coalitions, the UN Development Group for Latin America and the Caribbean and the UN Network on Migration); and inter-governmental regional organizations (e.g. Latin American and Caribbean Network of Environmental Funds, ECLAC, OAS, the Inter-American Human Rights System, the Southern Common Market, the Central American Integration System, the Caribbean Community and Common Market, and CLARCIEV).

C. Financial information

In October 2019, the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner’s Programme approved a budget of \$468 million for the Americas for 2020. By the end of January 2020, the total budget for the Americas amounted to \$505.5 million, due to an increase of \$24.9 million from the “new and additional activities – mandate-related” (NAM) reserve for the response to the emergency in Guatemala, as well as \$12.6 million across operations throughout the region affected by the Venezuela situation. By the end of August 2020, the total budget reached \$611.8 million, due to a further increase of \$22.5 million for El Salvador/Honduras from NAM reserves and \$93.2 million against the COVID-19 appeal (supplementary budget). The needs of the region have been 58 per cent funded at present.
