All Latin American countries but two are party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and/or its 1967 Protocol. Cuba and Guyana are not party to either treaty. The region hosts hundreds of thousands refugees, asylum-seekers and other people of concern to UNHCR. Most of them are from Colombia, which also has one of the largest internally displaced populations in the world: more than 280,000 were registered in 2007 alone.

Most Colombians who fled violence and abuses of human rights in their country have found refuge in Ecuador, the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, Panama and Costa Rica. However, very few of them are registered as asylum-seekers or refugees.

UNHCR recently conducted surveys in Ecuador and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela to get a better understanding of the number of unregistered Colombians in these countries. The surveys revealed that between 130,000 and 140,000 Colombians live in refugee-like situations in Ecuador. In the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, the survey was conducted only in border areas, where the number of Colombians was estimated at 118,000.

In Central America and Mexico, efforts to improve border security, guard against terrorism and counter human and drug trafficking have led to stricter controls on the movements of undocumented migrants. While the number of asylum-seekers has remained stable, it
appears that the number of interceptions, detentions and deportations has increased.

All Central American countries participate in the Puebla Process, a regional forum on migration, which reflects the importance these countries attach to migration issues. In this context, UNHCR will continue to keep asylum/migration issues on the agenda and seek to ensure that safeguards for refugee protection are respected in migration policies and practices.

In Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay, Governments maintain positive attitudes towards refugees’ human rights, while relative political stability and the support of former refugees who are now in prominent political positions also help. In Bolivia, the recent violence is of concern to UNHCR. The Office and the UN Country Team are closely monitoring the situation. UNHCR is also working with government counterparts to monitor borders in neighbouring countries to assess population movements and identify people in need of international protection.

Refugees and asylum-seekers in the southern Latin American region benefit from a legal framework that is mostly in line with international protection standards. National refugee commissions look into asylum applications and seek durable solutions for refugees. Moreover, the southern Latin American countries have ratified relevant international and regional instruments on human rights.

In southern Latin America, recent developments reflect governments’ commitment towards the welfare of refugees. In Brazil, a growing number of refugees benefit from government welfare programmes, scholarships, legal assistance, emergency accommodation and self-reliance opportunities. Refugees living with HIV and AIDS can avail themselves of government programmes on the same terms as nationals. In Chile, the Ministry of Planning is now fully involved in refugee affairs, and refugees are benefiting from the public welfare system. In Argentina, asylum-seekers and refugees benefit from public programmes, including a micro-credit fund that helps urban refugees in the capital.

**Strategy**

The Mexico Plan of Action and the Agenda for Protection will remain the framework for UNHCR’s operations in Latin America. The main goals of this
strategy are to strengthen protection and find durable solutions for those of concern to the Office.

The Cities of Solidarity pillar of the Mexico Plan of Action helps the Office to support the local integration and self-sufficiency of people in need of international protection in medium-sized and large cities. It aims at providing health care, education, employment and housing for refugees on par with services provided to nationals. To aid refugees’ self-sufficiency, UNHCR promotes their access to the labour market and implements income-generating projects. In this context, national and local governments play an important role by instituting refugee-friendly policies and allocating funds to assist the displaced.

The Borders of Solidarity pillar of the Mexico Plan of Action helps UNHCR to address protection concerns at borders—primarily those with Colombia. Local integration along the borders is promoted by closely linking assistance programmes to national and regional development plans.

The Solidarity Resettlement programme of the Mexico Plan of Action is of particular importance as a regional solidarity and responsibility-sharing mechanism. It benefits a limited number of mostly Colombian refugees who face protection risks in their countries of asylum. Almost 400 people were resettled in Argentina, Brazil and Chile in 2005-2007. In 2007, the programme was expanded to include refugees from outside the region. Of particular significance is the resettlement of 103 Palestinian refugees in Brazil in 2007. Another 100 Palestinian refugees were resettled in Chile in 2008.

Uruguay and Paraguay have also signed framework agreements with UNHCR to become resettlement countries. Uruguay is expected to resettle some 15 refugees in 2008. The coming years will be crucial for the establishment of reception capacity and local integration schemes in these countries. Experience gained from resettlement programmes elsewhere will be of great importance in making the new programmes a success.

In Mexico, meanwhile, UNHCR is promoting the establishment of safeguards to identify people in need of international protection among the many undocumented migrants in the country, including victims of trafficking and smuggling. To reach this objective, UNHCR has established strategic partnerships with national and civil society organizations. In 2009, it will work closely with the Government on the adoption of a new refugee law. The Government has also expressed willingness to establish a firm local integration framework for refugees.

In Central America, UNHCR will focus on strengthening legislation and the national capacity for refugee protection within mixed migratory flows, foster the establishment of civil-society protection networks, seek durable solutions
for refugees through local integration, and build institutional capacity to decide upon asylum claims.

In 2009, part of UNHCR’s Bureau for the Americas will be moved from Headquarters to Panama to bring decision making and support closer to the field and to maximize cost-effectiveness. One of the objectives is to improve coordination and implementation of a comprehensive regional response to situations of displacement, including an all-inclusive strategy for the Colombia Situation. Another is to improve UNHCR’s engagement with regionally based UN partners, NGOs and other institutions. The Regional Office in Panama will be better equipped to interact with the UN Regional Director’s Team in Panama, part of the UN’s new Regional Centre for Latin America and the Caribbean. The Office will also provide technical support to other UNHCR operations in Latin America. UNHCR’s regional office in Argentina covers operations in Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay.

Constraints

Throughout the region, unemployment and limited access to labour markets hamper the local integration of refugees and their search for self-sufficiency. These constraints also affect those refugees who have benefited from the regional resettlement programme.

In many countries, migration control measures adversely affect those in need of international protection. In some parts of the region UNHCR faces difficulties reaching displaced people in remote areas. The wide dispersal of people of concern is another problem.

In Mexico and Central America, governments give low priority to refugee protection. A major challenge is to ensure access to asylum procedures for unaccompanied and separated minors, as well as for victims of trafficking at Mexico’s southern border. Another constraint is a shortage of NGOs working with refugees.

In Brazil, the country’s large size makes programme and border monitoring expensive. In the other countries bordering Colombia, the deterioration of security in frontier areas is a serious concern.

Operations

UNHCR’s operations in the countries that are part of the Colombia Situation are described in a separate chapter. The number of refugees and asylum-seekers in Mexico and Central America stands at some 5,300. UNHCR will seek to ensure that asylum-seekers within mixed migratory flows are identified and have access to fair and efficient asylum procedures. In this context, UNHCR’s presence at Mexico’s southern border is essential.

UNHCR will also focus on addressing problems that hamper the local integration of refugees. The office in Mexico will concentrate on overcoming impediments to the regularization of status, including non-recognition of diplomas and certificates and difficulties in accessing public services. UNHCR and its partners will strengthen cooperation with relevant institutions to help refugees enter local labour markets.

In Cuba, although the Government offers free health care and education to refugees, local integration is unlikely. Resettlement and voluntary repatriation are therefore the only durable solution options. UNHCR will provide material and legal protection for the small number of refugees in the country until solutions can be found for them. In 2009, the last 75 Sahrawi students in Cuba are expected to return to the camps in Tindouf after finishing their studies.

In Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay, the number of refugees is expected to rise further as a consequence of the Colombian conflict. At the end of 2007, the region hosted some 5,500 refugees and 1,800 asylum-seekers—a big hike from the previous year. Apart from protecting and assisting new arrivals and people with specific needs, UNHCR will continue to seek durable solutions for people who cannot return home.

The Regional Office in Argentina will work to strengthen national and regional networks for the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers and the promotion of their rights; this is particularly crucial in border areas. It will also focus on the implementation of national laws and the strengthening of refugee status determination (RSD) procedures and institutional structures. A major aim is to consolidate the existing resettlement programmes in Chile and Argentina and develop resettlement capacity in Uruguay and Paraguay.

In Brazil, which hosted close to 4,000 refugees from more than 70 countries at the end of 2007, the Office will advocate for the formulation of public policies on refugees and access to social welfare programmes for them. UNHCR will continue to consolidate its protection and assistance functions. Strengthening the resettlement programme will be another key objective for the Office.

The Specialized Migratory Forum of MERCOSUR is an important vehicle for progress on the migration agenda in southern South America. It provides a unique opportunity for UNHCR to advocate for refugee protection. In 2009, the Office will continue to engage governments on the issue of mixed migration through this forum.
Financial information

UNHCR’s financial requirements in Latin America have increased significantly in recent years. This is mostly due to the expansion of the supplementary programme for IDPs in Colombia. The Annual Programme Budget has also risen because of the increase in the number of people of concern being assisted and the reinforcement of protection for unregistered individuals in refugee-like situations in the countries neighbouring Colombia. Furthermore, the cost of improving staff security has added to financial requirements.

The increase in the revised 2009 requirements, compared to the initial biennial budget for 2008-2009, is mainly due to the inclusion of unmet needs in Ecuador that were identified in the Global Needs Assessment initiative, and the mainstreaming of resettlement activities into the approved budget. The latter will improve the programme’s predictability while resettlement countries take more financial responsibility for the programme. The regionalization of UNHCR’s operations in the Americas, including the partial decentralization of the Americas Bureau from Headquarters, will have an impact on the overall requirements for 2009 due to transitional costs.

### Budget (USD)

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>2008</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Annual budget</td>
<td>Supplementary budget</td>
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<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
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<td>Total</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

1 Includes local integration in Argentina, Bolivia, Chile and Uruguay, as well as resettlement in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay.
2 Includes local integration in El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Belize.
3 Includes local integration in Peru.

Note: Supplementary programme budgets exclude 7 per cent support costs that are recovered from contributions to meet indirect costs for UNHCR.