

# Panama multi-Country Office

## Multi-year Strategy 2024 – 2026



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## 1.1 Executive Summary

UNHCR's Multi-country Office (MCO) in Panama operates in a diverse protection environment. Our teams navigate multiple political and cultural contexts and languages — Spanish, English, Papiamentu, and Dutch. This diversity brings challenges and opportunities for our teams, who must adapt to different environments while providing protection and assistance.

MCO Panama oversees nine operations: Aruba, Belize, Cuba, Curaçao, Guyana, Nicaragua, Panama, Suriname, and Trinidad and Tobago, with permanent staff or partner presence in eight countries. Since not all countries have acceded to the Geneva Refugee Convention, and some lack asylum systems, MCO Panama focuses on an area-based response approach, with tailored activities to meet the protection needs of each group UNHCR protects.

UNHCR's response primarily centers on protection and community-based initiatives. We provide legal support and counselling, conduct sensitization and awareness-raising sessions, offer capacity-building development, and advocate with decision-makers for expanding protection spaces. Additionally, we provide medical assistance and in-kind and cash support to cover basic needs and focus on livelihood and local integration initiatives across our operations. Our goal is to foster a sustainable and humane response for people in need of international protection, enabling refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless people to thrive and contribute to their new communities.

For the first time since becoming a multi-country office in 2021, UNHCR MCO Panama has developed a multi-year response strategy for 2024-2026, conducting sustainable programming with staff, partners, and the forcibly displaced community to identify the main challenges they face and finding key priorities to address.

This strategy helps to better assess the results of UNHCR activities and their impacts on the well-being of the population we protect. We maintain strong multifunctional teams and enhanced coordination with partners to make our strategy more effective and sustainable over time. This approach ensures that we can continue to provide meaningful support to those in need of international protection.

## 1.2 Situation Analysis

The ratification of the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol varies among the countries under MCO Panama's area of responsibility. Cuba, Curaçao, and Guyana are not signatories, and Trinidad and Tobago and Suriname have yet to implement an asylum system. Despite this, MCO Panama implements protection and humanitarian responses with multifunctional teams and partners to assist mixed movements of refugees and migrants through the Panamanian Darien jungle and the Venezuelan and Nicaraguan situations.

UNHCR collaborates closely with Governments, UN agencies, NGOs, civil society, and host communities to assist those in need of international protection. Our team of experts is dedicated to community-based protection, gender-based violence (GBV), shelter, and communication with communities (CwC) responses, effectively addressing these needs.

Due to the worsening socio-economic and political environments in countries of origin and ongoing instability across the Region, asylum-seekers, refugees, and others on the move continue to embark on cross-border journeys across MCO Panama's area of responsibility in search of protection and better life opportunities.

In Aruba and Curaçao, the lack of a legal international protection framework increases the risks of unlawful detentions and refoulement of asylum-seekers. There are no reception facilities on the islands. Refugees and Migrants that are intercepted (often while entering the country irregularly) are placed in detention facilities with poor conditions. In these countries, UNHCR also responds to gender-based violence survivors who often face significant barriers to accessing support services and protection.

In Trinidad and Tobago, a recent court decision ruled that the 1951 Refugee Convention obligations do not apply to the country, until they are incorporated into the domestic law. Several refugees and asylum-seekers have been detained, and despite UNHCR's efforts and legal actions, many have been returned to their countries of origin or, in the case of migrants, deported. Recently, the government allowed refugee and migrant children to access the national education system. However, many of these children still face challenges in accessing education due to missing required documentation and permits. UNHCR is working to provide alternative options to ensure these children can continue their education.

Cuba is not a state party to international refugee instruments. Due to the country's ongoing socio-economic crisis, integration opportunities for refugees and asylum-seekers remain limited and primarily depend on resettlement. The recent approval of laws on Immigration and Citizenship presents opportunities to strengthen UNHCR's programmes to ensure integration. However, there is still a need for more clarity on the response scope of these laws to refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless people.

In Belize, only recognized refugees are allowed to get work permits. This situation and the refugee status determination process length heighten asylum-seekers' vulnerability. In 2023, over 12,000 people

including over 900 asylum-seekers, applied for the Government's Amnesty Programme, an alternative regularization process that grants permanent residency to those qualifying. UNHCR is collaborating with the Government to review local asylum legislation, ensure that amnesty beneficiaries can cover the costs of their new IDs, and support the country as the 2024 Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (MIRPS) Pro-Tempore Chair.

Guyana hosts some 22,000 forcibly displaced people. Most are from Venezuelan indigenous communities living in remote areas, face language barriers, lack support networks, and are vulnerable to engaging in survival sex. The country's current border dispute with Venezuela has raised the population's alarm over the presence of Venezuelan refugees and migrants in the country. UNHCR works with the government to provide English as a Second Language (ESL) courses for forcibly displaced groups. This helps bridge language gaps and foster integration into their new communities. UNHCR is conducting awareness sessions about sexual and reproductive health and rights. We also address xenophobia and support the self-reliance of forcibly displaced groups.

In Nicaragua, human rights violations continue, with unlawful detentions of civilians for political reasons. Authorities approved an emergency reform to the Constitution, allowing the Government to strip the nationality of over 300 people on arbitrary grounds. Officials have closed academic institutions and confiscated assets of religious groups and NGOs based on national security allegations. Despite not having a presence in the country, UNHCR continues to monitor developments in Nicaragua. In previous years, through a partner, UNHCR assisted refugees and asylum-seekers with legal counseling and documentation.

In Panama, over 520,000 people crossed irregularly through the Darien jungle in 2023, doubling the previous year's record number registered, with nearly 300,000 more who have crossed so far in 2024. Most lack the resources to continue their journey and are often subject to violence and crimes like theft, robbery, sexual assault, and human trafficking. In border areas, the presence of the National Office for the Attention of Refugees (ONPAR) is limited, and Panama's complex asylum system challenges the integration of refugees and asylum-seekers nationwide. From 2022 to 2024, among other responses, UNHCR has protected and informed over 100,000 people on accessing the asylum system, clarifying the risks of continuing the route northwards and assisting those needing assistance with their asylum claims.

In the second half of 2022, Suriname introduced a visa-free policy for all nationalities, quickly becoming an entry point for people from various countries and continents moving through the Americas. However, in May 2023, Suriname removed 21 countries from the visa-free policy, including Afghanistan, Cuba, Eritrea, Syria, and Venezuela. UNHCR has assisted individuals from these countries and others who claim international protection. The Agency registers them as asylum-seekers and issues certificates, allowing them to apply for residency permits, obtain legal status in the country, and access fundamental rights. Additionally, the Government has shown readiness to collaborate with UNHCR in developing a national asylum system, further expanding the country's protection space.

### 1.3 Vision and Strategic Orientation

MCO Panama aims to expand the protection space for forcibly displaced groups and stateless people within its area of responsibility. By collaborating with authorities, partners, and civil society, UNHCR ensures access to protection mechanisms throughout its operations and strengthens local asylum systems to align with international standards. Our goal is to help refugees, asylum-seekers, and other vulnerable groups find long-term solutions to enable them to live safely, with dignity, and achieve self-reliance.

To accomplish our vision, MCO Panama's strategic priorities for the 2024-2026 period are designed to engage with a broader range of stakeholders. These priorities target advocacy efforts toward key decision-makers and enhance capacity development among entities responsible for primary protection responses across operations to ensure a sustainable impact.

As part of our collaborative efforts, UNHCR is implementing a Quality Assurance Initiative (QAI) in Aruba and in Panama to enhance the efficiency and effectiveness of asylum procedures. In Belize, UNHCR supported the Government reviewing the refugee legislation to meet international standards, and in Panama, we are proposing changes to asylum policies to streamline the decision-making, data-gathering, and documentation procedures, making them fairer for refugees and asylum-seekers. UNHCR works closely with the governments of Trinidad and Tobago and Suriname to create and reactivate local asylum systems, ensuring responsiveness to those seeking international protection.

Responding to mixed movements, especially, but not limited to, in Panama, will take increasing weight in UNHCR's strategy. The unprecedented displacement impacting the Americas shows that a considerable number of people engaged in mixed movements have protection needs. This situation requires UNHCR's tailored response to support local governments in assisting these groups. We will continue implementing

an area-based response, focusing on the Darien province and the Emberá-Wounaan indigenous territories. Our assistance prioritizes protection needs, regardless of status, and works on community-based protection initiatives with host and transit communities.

To enhance the integration of refugees, asylum-seekers, and stateless people, UNHCR advocates for inclusive policies and improving vulnerable populations' access to essential services. For instance, improve access to employment for forcibly displaced groups and stateless people in Cuba, Guyana, Panama, and Belize through greater flexibility in legal procedures. UNHCR is committed to enhancing access to healthcare and social security in Aruba, Panama, and Trinidad and Tobago, and we work to strengthen the state's response to gender-based violence and access to justice across all operations. Forcibly displaced children's education in Belize, Guyana, and Trinidad and Tobago is a priority. UNHCR works to alleviate administrative and legal hurdles so children can attend primary and secondary school without barriers.

UNHCR will provide multi-purpose cash assistance to support refugees and asylum-seekers' transition during integration. In cases where political challenges hinder access to adequate protection or integration measures, we will focus on alternative pathways and resettlement. This includes efforts in Cuba, Trinidad and Tobago, Aruba, Curaçao, and Panama.

## 1.4 Fair Access and Representation

MCO Panama prioritizes comprehensive age, gender, and diversity (AGD) data to advocate for protecting and integrating vulnerable groups, particularly those with specific needs. We conduct protection monitoring surveys, registration data assessments, and government census analysis, which allows UNHCR to tailor its response with initiatives that address these groups' most pressing needs.

Each operation has developed a multi-year plan with specific programmes, such as those for forcibly displaced children in Guyana, asylum-seeking and refugee entrepreneurs in Panama, and refugee and asylum-seeking school-age children in Trinidad and Tobago. In the coming years, UNHCR expects to introduce labor market studies to enhance forcibly displaced people's access to work.

UNHCR ensures two-way communication through its permanent presence in eight of the nine countries under its responsibility and through key field missions and border offices.

All UNHCR offices have protection desks and written communication channels, and most have online help pages providing easy-to-understand information on access to protection and asylum. In Suriname and Panama, we also count on a WhatsApp line to streamline communication with people needing international protection. Panama,



Trinidad and Tobago, and Aruba have chatbots to access further services. UNHCR maintains a two-way presence on social media through MCO Panama's and Trinidad and Tobago 'X' accounts, Belize's Facebook Page, and Confía en el Tucán (Trust the Toucan)'s social media platforms in TikTok and Facebook, with plans to expand to Youtube soon. These methods ensure accessibility across different ages, genders, and diversity, impacting the countries UNHCR covers and the people in need of international protection across the region.

Feedback and adjustments to the multi-year strategy are gathered through focus group discussions, planned reflection moments, and ongoing protection surveys. This approach ensures that the voices of forcibly displaced and stateless people are heard and considered in the decision-making processes that affect them. By addressing the challenges and barriers faced by individuals with specific AGD characteristics, UNHCR ensures that no one is left behind and that all individuals can participate in our programmes.

## 2. Impact Statements

### ***Impact statement***

#### ***Forcibly displaced and stateless people access comprehensive protection.***

*Impact area: Attaining favourable protection environments*

*Outcome statements*

*Forcibly displaced and stateless people have unhindered access to the territory; to a fair and equitable asylum process in line with international standards, including registration; and can obtain legal status.*

*Outcome area: Access to territory, registration and documentation*

### ***Impact statement***

#### ***Forcibly displaced and stateless people achieve the most appropriate durable solution in safety and dignity.***

*Impact area: Securing solutions*

*Outcome statements*

*Forcibly displaced and stateless people have access to humanitarian support to meet their basic needs while working towards solutions.*

*Outcome area: Well-being and basic needs*

*Opportunities for resettlement are increased for people in need of international protection most at risk.*

*Outcome area: Resettlement and complementary pathways*

*People in need of international protection are included in national systems and access their rights to work, social protection, education, and health.*

*Outcome area: Local integration and other local solutions*

*Risk of gender-based violence is mitigated and survivors have access to the support they need to build resilience.*

*Outcome area: Gender-based violence*

### 3. Panama Multi-Country Office 2025 Indicators and Targets

Country	Results Level	Result Area	Indicator	Population Type	Baseline	Target 2025
Aruba	Impact	IA4: Solve	4.2a Number of people who departed on resettlement	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	2	Not applicable
Cuba	Impact	IA4: Solve	4.2a Number of people who departed on resettlement	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	4	Not applicable
Panama	Impact	IA2: Respond	2.2 Proportion of people residing in physically safe and secure settlements with access to basic facilities	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	75%	Not applicable
Panama	Impact	IA2: Respond	2.3 Proportion of people with access to health services	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	88%	Not applicable
Panama	Impact	IA3: Empower	3.2a Proportion of children and young people enrolled in primary education	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	53%	Not applicable
Panama	Impact	IA3: Empower	3.2b Proportion of children and young people enrolled in secondary education	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	39%	Not applicable
Panama	Impact	IA3: Empower	3.3 Proportion of people feeling safe walking alone in their neighbourhood after dark	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	59%	Not applicable
Panama	Impact	IA4: Solve	4.2a Number of people who departed on resettlement	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	0	Not applicable



Trinidad and Tobago	Impact	IA3: Empower	3.2a Proportion of children and young people enrolled in primary education	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	25%	Not applicable
Trinidad and Tobago	Impact	IA3: Empower	3.2b Proportion of children and young people enrolled in secondary education	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	21%	Not applicable
Trinidad and Tobago	Impact	IA4: Solve	4.2a Number of people who departed on resettlement	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	406	Not applicable
Panama	Outcome	OA1: Access/Doc	1.3 Proportion of people with legally recognized identity documents or credentials	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	92%	100%
Panama	Outcome	OA8: Well-being	8.1 Proportion of people that receive cash transfers and/or non-food items	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	5%	50%
Panama, Cuba	Outcome	OA15: Resettle	15.1 Number of refugees submitted by UNHCR for resettlement	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	179	To be confirmed
Panama	Outcome	OA16: Integrate	16.1 Proportion of people with secure tenure rights to housing and/or land	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	30%	90%
Panama	Outcome	OA4: GBV	4.1 Proportion of people who know where to access available GBV services	Refugees and Asylum-seekers	48%	100%