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Update on UNHCR's operations in the Americas**A. Situational context including new developments****Venezuela situation**

Venezuelans continue to leave their country in significant numbers, primarily through land borders, with the majority arriving in Colombia. Of the 4.3 million people who have left Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), over 3.5 million are hosted in Latin America and the Caribbean. While more than 2 million have been granted temporary legal stay arrangements and over 600,000 have requested asylum, many Venezuelans continue to find themselves in an irregular situation.

Over the past three years, most governments in the region have shown commendable solidarity towards Venezuelan refugees and migrants, providing them with access to territory, protection and assistance, including through new regularization processes and national response plans. However, the capacity of host countries is overstretched, which, in some instances has led to communal tensions and fuelled xenophobic sentiment. Recently, a few countries have taken restrictive measures, with respect to access to territory for Venezuelans. UNHCR is concerned that this may force some to move onwards, increasing the risk of exploitation and abuse, extortion, and smuggling and trafficking. For their part, the Governments of Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Uruguay have maintained an open-door policy for Venezuelans. Colombia has allowed hundreds of thousands of Venezuelans to move freely back and forth and has welcomed the return of some 400,000 Colombians who had been residing in Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) for an extended period of time.

At the regional level, the Quito Process has played a fundamental role in harmonizing policies and practices including with respect to the Venezuelan crisis, across the Americas region. In July 2019, on the occasion of the fourth international technical meeting (Quito IV) since the Declaration of Quito was issued in 2018, a roadmap of priority actions was adopted. These thematic areas included documentation and registration, reception and legal orientation arrangements, access to rights and basic services, child protection, socio-economic integration, strengthening national refugee commissions, and the mobilization of international support. Furthermore, the creation of a group of donor support countries was announced.

In the period leading up to the fifth technical meeting, to be hosted by the Government of Colombia in November 2019, UNHCR will work to further mobilize the international community, including development actors, to support host countries in meeting the needs of Venezuelans and to facilitate their socio-economic inclusion. To this end, the European Union is organizing the Solidarity Conference on Venezuelan Refugees and Migrants in Brussels at the end of October 2019, in collaboration with UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). International financial institutions are also playing a fundamental role by making concessional funding available for affected countries.

These efforts are being carried out in parallel to the implementation of activities outlined in the Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) and those of the Regional Inter-agency Coordination Platform, co-led by UNHCR and IOM, which complement the efforts of national and local authorities in addressing humanitarian needs. Activities carried out in the RMRP include cash-based interventions, communication with communities and broader communication strategies, education,

gender-based violence, information management, integration, and support spaces, which provide psychosocial and legal services. On a monthly basis, more than 100,000 people of all ages, genders and backgrounds are able to benefit from such assistance at the support spaces.

Under the leadership of the UNHCR-IOM Joint Special Representative (JSR), the two organizations supported States in meeting the commitments made in the context of the Quito Process. The JSR has also called for increased donor support to address the growing humanitarian and protection needs.

As underscored in UNHCR's "Guidance note on international protection considerations for Venezuelans – update I", and in light of recent restrictive measures taken by some States, access to territory and to asylum procedures is of critical importance. This includes recognition through group-based refugee status determination procedures, and access to other protection arrangements and responses with adequate safeguards.

In line with the United Nations humanitarian response inside Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), UNHCR is scaling up its operation to address the needs of affected populations through community-based projects aimed at preventing displacement, mitigating protection risks and strengthening the resilience of affected communities. Within the Humanitarian Response Plan (HRP), UNHCR leads the protection cluster and the shelter/non-food items/energy cluster. Inside Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), UNHCR continues to provide protection to refugees and persons in need of international protection. UNHCR's community-based protection and assistance programmes include projects in the areas of protection, social cohesion, health care, education, water and sanitation and shelter, as well as the provision of core relief items.

Colombia situation

While much international attention has shifted towards the mass arrival of Venezuelans in Colombia, the objectives of the country's peace agreement continue to be pursued in the face of numerous challenges. Key among these are the recent calls for re-armament by certain leaders of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Protection challenges persist in and around FARC demobilization areas, along the country's border with Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), its southern borders and the Pacific Coast. These include a high prevalence of homicidal attacks against community leaders; the use of anti-personnel mines and the presence of unexploded ordnance; the recruitment of child soldiers; the targeting of specific social groups; and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV). Chronic displacement, whether new or recurring, as well as restrictions on movement are commonplace in these areas and predominantly affect indigenous people and Afro-Colombians. In 2018 and the first half of 2019, 176,000 people were displaced and all require humanitarian assistance. UNHCR continues to advocate that the Victims and Land Restitution Law be upheld to protect internally displaced persons (IDPs) throughout the implementation of the peace agreement.

In this context, an increasing number of Colombians continue to seek asylum in Ecuador, with an average of over 450 asylum applications recorded each month. Notwithstanding this, the number of asylum claims made by Venezuelans has now surpassed those made by Colombians, placing Ecuador under the strain of two distinct displacement crises.

North of Central America situation

Nationals from the north of Central America (NCA) continue to leave their countries in 2019, mainly fleeing violence, insecurity and deteriorating economic conditions, as well as the effects of drought. To date this year, over 800,000 people were apprehended trying to reach the United States of America, many of whom believed to have been in need of international protection. In Mexico, asylum applications have reached their highest number ever, amounting to a total of 48,000 between January to August 2019, a 231 per cent increase compared with the same period last year.

In Honduras, where violence and insecurity endure at the hands of gangs and other armed groups, political tension has been on the rise, causing additional departures. In El Salvador, the Government agreed to apply the comprehensive refugee response framework (CRRF), known in the region by its Spanish acronym MIRPS. In so doing, it joined five other Central American countries and Mexico in a coordinated regional response to displacement. A legal framework to protect IDPs was submitted to the legislative assembly in El Salvador. On the southern border of the United States of America, the number of Guatemalans apprehended amounted to more than 200,000 in the first half of 2019. Law enforcement measures have driven up the number of deportations to these Central American countries, overstressing reception capacity and their ability to properly identify and assist persons in need of protection. Almost 157,500 deportations were registered between January and July, a 41 per cent increase compared to the same period in 2018. As a result, scaling up protection and integration activities for deportees is becoming increasingly important.

Under the Migration Protection Protocol (MPP) currently implemented in the United States of America, over 42,000 potential asylum-seekers were returned to Mexico to await their respective court hearings. Adequate reception conditions remain a challenge, and humanitarian assistance is limited, while the safety and security conditions in certain locations pose serious concern. Furthermore, a new policy was recently adopted in the United States of America barring eligibility for asylum-seekers who have crossed the country's southern border after passing through a third country where they could have applied for asylum.

In this context, and with bilateral agreements being concluded on the return of asylum-seekers to third countries in the region, UNHCR stands ready to provide advice and support to ensure that all governments concerned adhere to their protection obligations set forth in the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees and its 1967 protocol. UNHCR also reiterates the importance of a protection-sensitive regional approach to this displacement situation.

In line with the MIRPS and in the spirit of the Global Compact on Refugees, UNHCR is contributing to the Comprehensive Development Plan for Central America. This is an initiative taken by Mexico and the NCA countries, with the support of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC). It aims to create conditions for sustainable development and mitigate the causes of displacement, to better manage human mobility in the region. In this context UNHCR is working to ensure that responses to population movements are protection sensitive, while looking for solutions by supporting long-term humanitarian and development investment strategies.

Nicaragua

The situation in Nicaragua has remained calm, but tense, while the political process has stalled following agreements between the Government and the country's opposition movement. Continuous reports of human rights violations have been recorded, and the number of Nicaraguans seeking international protection continues to rise.

The total number of asylum-seekers from Nicaragua now stands at over 82,000, with over 32,000 applications registered in Costa Rica and some 30,000 pending cases, making Costa Rica the largest receiving country of asylum-seekers from Nicaragua. Panama and countries in Europe have also seen sharp increases in the number of requests, especially in the last two months.

While the Costa Rican authorities have made significant efforts to address this situation, challenges remain in efficiently handling the unprecedentedly high number of asylum applications. A UNHCR-led inter-agency rapid response plan was developed to address the immediate protection and health care needs and enable affected populations to provide for themselves, mainly through cash-based interventions.

B. Regional strategic priorities

Access to asylum

In the context of the Venezuela situation, most South-American host countries have continued to use ad hoc regularization processes or existing national and regional legal frameworks to provide documentation, legal stay and access to basic rights to the increasing numbers of Venezuelans in need of international protection. As per the “Guidance note on international protection considerations for Venezuelans – update I”, UNHCR continues to encourage the adoption of a harmonized regional approach which includes protection safeguards. Within the framework of the Quito Process, UNHCR is providing technical assistance and operational support to host States in order to enhance their capacity to respond to large-scale displacement in a timely manner and strengthen their refugee status determination procedures.

While humanitarian space has shrunk in certain areas, some countries have taken steps to apply the extended refugee definition under the Cartagena Declaration and are developing simplified or accelerated refugee status determination case processing modalities to address increasing asylum applications. In this respect, UNHCR provided advice and training to Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic and Mexico. In cooperation with the Americas Network for Refugee Legal Aid, UNHCR supported advocacy efforts aimed at securing access to free legal representation for persons in need of international protection across the region. UNHCR also worked to support public defenders and ombudspersons involved in refugee protection.

Registration and protection monitoring

UNHCR supports the Refugee Commissions of Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Peru and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) contributing to the development of registration databases with adequate data protection safeguards that enhance targeting, caseload management, statistical production and the issuance of documentation.

UNHCR uses its Population Registration and Identity Management EcoSystem (PRIMES) in several countries across the region to identify vulnerable persons of concern and facilitate the delivery of assistance and services, and improve protection case management as well as the prevention of fraud. More than 65,000 individuals across 13 operations were registered in UNHCR’s proGres v4 database, a component of PRIMES, from March to August 2019.

UNHCR rolled out a regional protection monitoring system which is now in place in 11 operations. Under this system, over 8,000 interviews have been conducted with some 20,000 individuals, principally in the context of displacement from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of). Protection monitoring activities carried out in this context have contributed to strengthen community outreach, evidence-based advocacy, the identification and referral of persons with specific needs, services mapping and the adjustment of operational responses accordingly.

Protection of children and prevention of sexual and gender-based violence

Displaced people in the Americas continue to be affected by SGBV, femicide, exploitation and trafficking. In addition, children face the risk of family separation and recruitment into military groups and gangs. Compounding these dangers are limited access to documentation and basic services.

States participating in the Quito Process have committed to ensure child protection for Venezuelan refugees and migrants. Consultations on a draft regional protocol for the protection of refugee and migrant children from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) is expected to be held in the coming months, with the final protocol to be presented at the upcoming high-level “Quito V” meeting in November 2019.

Furthermore, the regional safe spaces network (RSSN) continued to expand and now includes 14 countries (110 members). Through the RSSN, over 4,900 vulnerable individuals were provided with assistance from January to April 2019. To address sexual exploitation and abuse and sexual harassment in the work place, the RSSN began developing a regional toolkit and complaint referral mechanism.

Comprehensive solutions

Including persons of concern in the region's economies remains a challenge. Impediments include bureaucratic and legal barriers to accessing employment and a lack of entrepreneurship opportunities.

UNHCR continued to implement its global livelihoods strategy in the Americas with a view to including persons of concern in national plans and policies, focusing particularly on urban areas in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador and Panama. In this context, four inter-agency employment and entrepreneurship fora were held in Brazil and Ecuador. UNHCR, IOM and UN-Habitat signed a three-year European Union-funded project on fostering communities for Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador and Peru.

The cities of solidarity initiative embedded in the Brazil Plan of Action aims to enhance operational, multi-stakeholder responses in urban settings, with a view to advancing integration and building institutional responses. Preparations are ongoing for its roll-out in municipalities in four countries.

Eradication of statelessness

The Americas region continued taking steps towards becoming the first continent to end statelessness. In July 2019, Argentina established national statelessness status determination procedures and adopted a protection framework that facilitates the naturalization of stateless persons. In Jamaica, a policy on statelessness is being developed. In the Bahamas, UNHCR provided support for drafting a new nationality, immigration and asylum bill which contains safeguards that prevent statelessness at birth, while in Costa Rica, a "towards zero statelessness" mechanism was adopted. In the Dominican Republic, UNHCR continues to work with the national authorities and other stakeholders to promote access to nationality solutions through existent legislation under law 169-14.

In Colombia, a new draft bill on migration that includes a chapter dedicated to the identification and protection of stateless persons was submitted to parliament. With support from UNHCR, IOM and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), the Colombian Government also adopted an exceptional and temporary measure to grant Colombian nationality to children born within its territory to Venezuelan parents.

UNHCR's engagement with States in the region ahead of the high-level segment on statelessness at the seventieth session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme has led to a number of commitments being made. A comparative study carried out by UNHCR on statelessness and late birth registration is underway, in collaboration with the Organization of Americas States and the Latin American and Caribbean Council of Civil Registration, Identity and Vital Statistics.

C. Financial information

In October 2018, the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme approved a budget of \$213.1 million for the Americas for 2019. As at the end of August 2019, the total budget for the Americas amounted to \$340.7 million. This included increases for the Venezuela situation comprising an additional \$72 million for the Regional Refugee and Migrants Response Plan (RMRP) and additional critical needs totalling \$55.8 million in response to the influx in Mexico as well as the Venezuela situation, met with transfers from the reserves.