

**Executive Committee of the
High Commissioner's Programme**

19 March 2021
English
Original: English and French

**Standing Committee
80th meeting**

Update on UNHCR's operations in the Americas**A. Situational overview**

The Americas region currently hosts more than 16 million refugees, asylum-seekers, displaced and stateless people, representing some 20 per cent of persons of concern to UNHCR worldwide.

Venezuela situation

By the end of 2020, refugees and migrants from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) totalled 5.4 million globally – representing the second-largest displacement crisis in the world – with 85 per cent hosted by countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Globally, over 143,000 have been recognized as refugees and close to 800,000 asylum claims were made. Across the region, 2.5 million people have been granted some form of residency or regular stay permit.

Inside Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), UNHCR continues to lead the protection cluster and the cluster responsible for shelter, energy and non-food items. As part of the Humanitarian Response Plan for the country, in 2020 the Office provided direct and indirect assistance to almost 1.5 million people in host communities, particularly in border areas, including people at risk of displacement and those who are on the move. For Venezuelans who returned to the country during the new coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic, the Office supported provincial authorities and civil society organizations in their efforts to provide dignified quarantine facilities and other forms of assistance.

Across the region, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the dire conditions that refugees and migrants already faced, and its severe socioeconomic impacts intensified protection concerns. The risks of exploitation and abuse increased, as did the number of Venezuelans who lost their jobs, rendering them unable to fully meet their basic needs, such as food and shelter. In many countries, refugees and migrants are not systematically included in the social safety nets established for local populations. For more than 30 per cent of refugees and migrants from Venezuela, the challenges are compounded by a lack of regular status. They are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, as well as the potential exclusion from national systems, such as health care. However, to improve protection and access to essential services and solutions for 1.7 million Venezuelans in the country, Colombia recently announced the granting of a 10-year temporary protection status to Venezuelans, which will also give them access to legal stay, documentation, employment and health care services, among others, including COVID-19 vaccination programmes.

The initial months of the pandemic resulted in a wave of spontaneous returns to Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) of approximately 130,000 people. Despite official border closures, population trends have since reversed with renewed outflows and onward movements increasing in the last quarter of 2020. Host countries, together with UNHCR, are preparing for significant population movements in the first half of 2021. The Office worked with national authorities and partners on contingency planning and preparedness measures, including strengthening reception arrangements and assistance programmes.

Meanwhile, the roll-out of COVID-19 vaccination campaigns has amplified the need to include people on the move, as well as the large number who remain without regular status, to mitigate individual and public health risks.

The Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform, co-led by UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM), coordinated the response for Venezuelan refugees and migrants across 17 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. Under the Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP), some 2.9 million refugees and migrants from Venezuela, as well as members of host communities, were assisted in 2020. The protection response – provided by over 70 partners – included the provision of legal assistance, the regularization and issuance of documentation, support for family reunification and child protection, and counselling and referral to address gender-based violence. Some 723,000 people benefitted from these and other activities related to protection needs. Food assistance, in the form of communal kitchens or food baskets, was provided by partners to more than 1.7 million people, while some 548,000 received cash and voucher assistance. To counter the growing anti-xenophobic developments in a number of host countries, UNHCR and its partners rolled out a regional anti-xenophobia campaign that reached more than 8 million viewers through online concerts, social media and direct engagement with local communities.

Meanwhile, the pro-tempore leadership of the Quito Process, the principal regional coordination forum between governments hosting Venezuelans, has passed from Chile to Peru. The seventh round of the Quito Process is planned for May 2021 and will aim to focus on addressing thematic priorities such as socioeconomic inclusion, asylum processes, family reunification, child protection and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

To mobilize additional support for the regional crisis, an international donor’s conference to be organized by Canada is scheduled to take place in June 2021 to fund the RMRP, with the support of other donor States and international financial institutions.

Colombia situation

The national registry of victims recorded that nearly 64,000 people were newly displaced in Colombia in 2020. New displacement, violence and control by illegal armed groups, as well as the far-reaching impacts of the pandemic, such as restrictions on mobility, posed further challenges to advancing solutions for internally displaced persons (IDPs) and reduced humanitarian access. Indigenous and afro-Colombian communities along the Pacific Coast and in border areas were particularly affected. In the last year, 90 community leaders were killed, 165 people were victims of anti-personnel mines or unexploded ordnances and the highest number of massacres (66) was recorded since 2007, despite important efforts to implement the 2016 Peace Agreement.

UNHCR continues to reinforce Colombia’s institutional response to conflict-affected populations through protection monitoring, advocacy, outreach and humanitarian assistance. The Office engages directly with affected populations to enhance their understanding of their rights and to facilitate a dialogue with local and national authorities. UNHCR further collaborates with the Ombudsperson’s Office on the “House of Rights” and supports local authorities and communities – including Colombian IDPs and returnees and Venezuelan refugees and migrants – to legalize informal settlements.

North of Central America situation

As a result of criminal gangs, violence, insecurity and economic hardship, some 515,000 people from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras have sought international protection in other countries, principally in the region, while 318,600 have been internally displaced within El Salvador and Honduras in the last five years.

The impact of the pandemic has been particularly severe in Central America. COVID-19 prevention measures, such as the closure of borders and restrictions on mobility, have limited the ability for people to leave, resulting in an initial decrease in the number of asylum-seekers in Mexico. Yet – as the root causes of displacement remain unaddressed and despite mobility constraints – record numbers of new arrivals were registered in Mexico in December 2020 alone, and an unprecedented 8,000 people participated in the first so-called “caravan” moving north in 2021.

The devastation caused by hurricanes Eta and Iota in late 2020 further aggravated the situation. The worst-hit areas included communities acutely affected both by violence and the pandemic, increasing protection concerns.

The Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework (known as MIRPS by its Spanish acronym) remained essential towards promoting a coordinated response to forced displacement in the region. Seven participating countries (Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Panama) continued to implement their national plans by bolstering the mechanisms for protection and integration. In December 2020, MIRPS countries adopted the San Salvador city Declaration to advocate the inclusion of displaced people and returnees with protection needs into the socioeconomic recovery plans for the pandemic and natural disasters. Guatemala assumed the pro-tempore presidency from El Salvador for 2021, while Spain holds this role for the MIRPS Support Platform. The Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean joined the Support Platform in December 2020, thereby strengthening coordination with development actors. The Support Platform has helped to raise the visibility of forced displacement in the sub-region, identify private-sector actors and strengthen the capacity of asylum systems through technical cooperation and the search for solutions.

Nicaragua situation

To date, nearly 108,000 asylum-seekers and refugees from Nicaragua have sought international protection. Some 85 per cent are hosted in neighbouring countries, with the majority in Costa Rica, which hosts 87,000.

As elsewhere in the region, the impacts of the pandemic together with hurricanes Eta and Iota compounded existing political and socioeconomic challenges in Nicaragua, requiring significant recovery efforts. Continuous restrictions on border movements led to people crossing at irregular points. The combination of the socioeconomic downturn, loss of livelihoods and difficult living conditions in many of the neighbouring countries, prompted some to return to Nicaragua despite adverse conditions.

UNHCR and its partners are supporting host countries in their response to the increased needs of Nicaraguans seeking international protection in a number of ways, including: by strengthening asylum systems, providing humanitarian assistance through cash-based incentives, enabling innovative approaches towards including asylum-seekers in public health systems, and facilitating the socioeconomic inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers.

B. Regional strategic priorities

Operationalization of the Global Compact on Refugees

UNHCR continued to support States and other actors in the Americas in implementing the pledges made at the 2019 Global Refugee Forum (GRF) and the high-level segment on statelessness, which took place during the seventieth session of the Executive Committee. In line with the Global Compact on Refugees, the pledges comprised several important areas: asylum capacity-building, education, civil registration, jobs and livelihoods, infrastructure, access to services, and inclusion in national systems and solutions. In consultation with States

and relevant stakeholders, the pledges are being prioritized and potential opportunities for financial and technical support are being identified. Progress was also made on identifying matching opportunities for GRF pledges related to refugee status determination and on identifying requests that either offer or request support that could be channelled through the Asylum Capacity Support Group¹.

Access to protection and strengthening asylum capacities

Supporting stretched asylum systems in the context of the pandemic was a main area of focus for UNHCR. Due to COVID-19 prevention imperatives, governments in the region restricted movements, curtailed entry into their territory, and in some countries, suspended or postponed asylum procedures, eligibility interviews and registration services. Despite these hurdles, many countries continued to adopt, with UNHCR's support, innovative methods and technologies to ensure continued access to asylum. Argentina, Ecuador, El Salvador, Mexico and Uruguay, among others, developed remote registration and eligibility interviews, while Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Colombia, Costa Rica and Panama extended the validity of personal documentation and work permits of asylum-seekers through online systems.

By June 2020, a total of more than 2,000,000 asylum claims were registered in the Americas, including approximately 925,700 in the United States of America; 500,600 in Peru; 209,300 in Brazil; 99,500 in Canada; 90,600 in Costa Rica; and 78,600 in Mexico. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the capacity of States to process refugee status determination applications was reduced, and by June 2020, nearly 107,600 decisions on asylum claims were taken, including some 18,500 people being recognized as refugees, 39,800 asylum claims being rejected and 53,000 applications otherwise closed. With regard to Venezuelans, by December 2020, approximately 143,500 Venezuelans were recognized as refugees. This figure included some 46,300 in Brazil; 15,700 in the United States of America; 10,800 in Mexico; 3,100 in Canada; and 1,300 in Peru. Globally, the total number of pending asylum claims from Venezuela by the end of 2020 amounted to nearly 793,900, including approximately 496,100 claims in Peru; 105,000 in the United States of America; 96,600 in Brazil; 29,100 in Ecuador; 8,800 in Colombia; 8,500 in Mexico; 3,700 in Argentina, and 2,900 in Chile.

States in the region continued to implement temporary legal entry and stay arrangements and regularization programs for Venezuelan nationals. In addition to Colombia's 10-year temporary protection status programme announcement, Ecuador and Peru also extended the regularization process for Venezuelans, while the Dominican Republic, in January 2021, approved a resolution to establish a regularization pathway. In Costa Rica, UNHCR is providing support to digitalize registration and refugee status determination procedures. Furthermore, a new regime of complementary protection was established, implemented from mid-February 2021, and benefiting rejected asylum-seekers from Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) who are unable to return to their countries of origin.

The General Assembly of the Organization of American States (OAS) passed a resolution on the promotion and protection of human rights, calling on UNHCR and others, as well as the international community, to support the design, financing and implementation of national projects. The projects are aimed at achieving more robust national asylum systems for interested States, with the support of UNHCR and the Asylum Capacity Support Group. At the regional level, initiatives are aimed at fostering training and exchanges of best practices among the

¹ The Asylum Capacity Support Group is an initiative of the Global Compact on Refugees aimed at ensuring that asylum support between States and other stakeholders is provided in a consistent and impactful manner, and for increasing the consistency and availability of support to strengthen the capacity of national asylum and refugee status determination systems.

national commissions for refugees, the identification of at-risk profiles using country-of-origin information, the sharing of best practices through a digital platform, and the dissemination of a model for determining refugee status.

Registration and household surveys

During the pandemic, UNHCR swiftly set up remote registration procedures, providing life-saving assistance and protection to an increasingly vulnerable population of concern. Over 508,000 persons of concern were registered across the region by UNHCR in its Population Registration and Identity Management EcoSystem (PRIMES), as well as by its partners, including individual and family-level registration.

Adapting to the pandemic-related restrictions in movement imposed by governments, UNHCR introduced a harmonized and shorter household high-frequency survey suitable for telephone interviews, with strengthened data collection and analysis methodologies. In a pilot phase during the last quarter of 2020, approximately 3,300 household interviews were conducted in Argentina, Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Panama and Peru. The results of the surveys are key to monitoring the impact of the pandemic on persons of concern to UNHCR, and to inform its programming and protection response.

Shelter and settlement response

UNHCR's shelter response was similarly adapted in the face of COVID-19-related challenges, both in border areas and in urban centres across 15 countries in the region. Shelter I interventions included the rehabilitation and scaling-up of temporary collective shelters to accommodate the Venezuelan indigenous population, providing access to rental schemes and hotels for people who were evicted after losing their source of income. The construction of community infrastructure targeting refugees and host communities alike (representing 69 per cent of the interventions) was facilitated. UNHCR further supported the pandemic response of health authorities through the expansion, renovation and construction of health infrastructure with 264 projects. In addition, the Office provided 1,315 refugee housing units, mostly in border areas, including to serve as quarantine facilities.

Gender-based violence and child protection

Incidents of human trafficking, gender-based violence, evictions, discrimination and xenophobia increased as a result of the pandemic. For people in need, access to basic services, such as health care, was often hindered by a lack of documentation. Up to 80 per cent of refugees in the region are estimated to have lost their jobs in 2020 due to COVID-19, with protection risks soaring as a result, particularly among vulnerable populations.

In response, UNHCR offered technical assistance to promote the inclusion of persons of concern in national protection systems, and promoted 187 support spaces to provide access to information and minimum services, as well as identification and referrals of people with specific needs. The Regional Safe Spaces Network provided specialized services to survivors of gender-based violence and children at risk. Community outreach was also expanded.

Achieving durable solutions

UNHCR advanced its livelihoods strategy in the Americas, with a focus on the inclusion of persons of concern in national plans and systems. In pursuit of this aim, the Office continued to work closely with a wide range of stakeholders, including development actors, the private sector and international financial institutions. Inclusion, similarly, is an area of focus of both the MIRPS and the Quito Process. In Ecuador, UNHCR's advocacy resulted in regulatory changes that allow asylum-seekers to open bank accounts by using their country-of-origin identification. In several countries in the region, refugees and asylum-seekers with medical training were employed to help respond to the pandemic.

Despite the restrictions imposed during the pandemic, UNHCR identified, processed and referred refugees for resettlement programmes, and the protection transfer arrangement was implemented in the north of Central America. New pilot resettlement programmes have been developed in Colombia and Peru for Venezuelan refugees. The cases of thirty Venezuelans were submitted for resettlement in 2020, while capacity has been strengthened to enable the identification and processing for up to 450 individuals in 2021. 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.

Work is ongoing to enhance community and private sponsorship programmes for additional resettled refugees through UNHCR's identification and referral mechanisms. Solutions could be expanded to third countries such as Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, in line with UNHCR's three-year strategy on resettlement and complementary pathways, and related GRF pledges.

Ensuring protection and solutions for internally displaced persons

The Americas is home to more than 8.2 million IDPs, a number that has increased markedly. Complex internal displacement situations further deteriorated with the impacts of the pandemic. UNHCR engaged with States and other partners to deliver protection services and solutions for displaced populations. At the field level, the implementation of the 2019 "Policy on UNHCR's engagement in situations of internal displacement" has framed UNHCR's responses and collective efforts, including supporting the development of national legislation and policies (in El Salvador, Honduras and Mexico), strengthening communities and key stakeholders, and implementing community-based initiatives to prevent displacement and to protect those at heightened risk, such as children, youth and community leaders.

The Office continued to collaborate with regional actors (including the OAS), national and local governments, national human rights institutions, United Nations agencies, civil society organizations and affected communities towards prevention measures to protect and assist displaced people. The lessons learned from past work in support of IDPs contributed to the report of the Regional Exchange on Preventing and Addressing Internal Displacement in the Americas as part of the twentieth anniversary of the guiding principles on internal displacement (GP20) initiative, keeping the momentum to advance collaboratively towards finding solutions and ending internal displacement in the region. In addition, UNHCR, together with the San Remo International Institute of Humanitarian Law, developed and implemented a course on internal displacement benefiting participants from Mexico and the north of Central America.

UNHCR led the response to persons of concern affected by impacts of tropical storms Eta and Iota in Honduras, many of whom were already at risk due to worsening insecurity and violence in their communities.

In Colombia, progress towards legalizing informal settlements – inhabited both by Colombian IDPs and returnees, as well as Venezuelan refugees and migrants – was an important step forward in the realization of solutions. Colombia's Victims' Law, which addresses the rights of victims of conflict, was extended until 2031.

Eradication of statelessness

Efforts towards the eradication of statelessness in the region continued with the support of UNHCR. In Argentina, the adoption of a new law allows for late birth registration through administrative procedures and facilitates the provision of evidence to verify the place of birth. Mexico has modified its Constitution to allow for the transfer of nationality by jus sanguinis – a principle of nationality law by which citizenship is determined or acquired by the nationality or ethnicity of one or both parents – to children of naturalized parents. In Colombia, some 51,000 children born in the country to Venezuelan parents had acquired Colombian nationality by December 2020 through the Primero la Niñez project. In January 2021, the Governments of Haiti and the Dominican Republic adopted a joint declaration to initiate a combined process of

identification and registration in Haiti's Civil Registry of all Haitian citizens who are on Dominican territory without a birth certificate.

UNHCR strengthened its partnership with the OAS Universal Civil Identity Program in the Americas (known as PUICA by its Spanish acronym) and the Latin American and Caribbean Council for Civil Registration, Identity and Vital Statistics (known as CLARCIEV by its Spanish acronym) towards achieving full access to civil documentation and civil registry services by persons of concern. The partnership also aims at enhancing national civil registry capacities for the prevention and reduction of statelessness. As part of this collaboration, the report "Emergency response of civil registry and *identification* offices during the COVID-19 pandemic: good practices, mechanisms and facilities implemented in the Americas" and a regional study on late birth registration, issuance of nationality documentation and statelessness were published in January 2021. These will form the basis of regional guidelines on granting effective access to late birth registration and identity documentation.

Strengthening inter-agency coordination, advocacy and partnerships, and mobilizing support

UNHCR worked in close coordination with United Nations Regional and Country Teams, and advocated multi-stakeholder engagement and responsibility-sharing, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 response, to promote the inclusion of forcibly displaced populations in national plans.

The Office also scaled up its outreach to development actors and international financial institutions, including the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank. Both institutions made significant contributions in support of countries hosting forcibly displaced people in the region, including in the context of an international donor's conference for the Venezuela situation, organized by Spain and the European Union, with the support of UNHCR and IOM, in May 2020. The conference resulted in mobilizing over \$2 billion from international financial institutions. The number of donors contributing to UNHCR's programmes in the Americas increased from 32 in 2019 to 51 in 2020.

C. Financial information

In October 2020, the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme approved a budget of \$573.8 million for the Americas for 2021. By the end of January 2021, the total budget for the region amounted to \$712.3 million, due to a total increase of \$138.5 million (composed of \$73.6 million from the 2021 supplementary budget for activities related primarily to the exceptional protection and socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 and \$64.9 million mainly linked to the Venezuela situation emergency increased needs). As of 15 February 2021, operational needs for the Americas have been 7 per cent funded (with \$50.9 million including indicative allocation of flexible funding).