

**COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN 2002**  
**REGIONAL OFFICE CARACAS**  
**VENEZUELA, ECUADOR, PANAMA, GUYANA and SURINAM**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

***a) Context (Beneficiary Population(s) and Theme(s))***

The Regional Office's objectives and activities in 2002 will continue to be carried out within the framework of the regional strategy for the strengthening of the protection of Colombian asylum seekers and refugees. However, the regional strategy should be reviewed and adapted to the latest geopolitical changes, constraints and opportunities.

Accomplishments since 1998 include: legal framework strengthened in Ecuador and Panama, developing and implementing emergency preparedness plans, increasing monitoring capabilities in Panama, Ecuador and Venezuela along the Colombian borders, reinforcing operations and enhancing UNHCR's profile and image in the region. Further UNHCR's knowledge and understanding of the refugee situation in Panama, Ecuador and Venezuela. UNHCR's presence in the region has also been increased by the creation of a Liaison Office in Quito, and Field Offices in Sucumbios, Ecuador and San Cristobal, Venezuela.

The creation of conditions for asylum and for the adoption of liberal asylum policies by the countries covered by the Regional Office is a long-term goal. The Regional Office's main objective in the year 2002 will, therefore, continue to be the strengthening of the protection of asylum seekers and refugees.

The beneficiaries of UNHCR's work in the region are divided as follows: (i) urban refugees, (ii) rural refugees, and (iii) other persons of UNHCR concern. The largest group of refugees and persons of concern in the region consists of Colombians who represent 57% of the total regional caseload, followed by Cuban refugees who represent 13%. The majority of Colombian refugees have sought protection in Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela, while Cubans have found asylum in Peru.

Considering the present trend of new arrivals, which is estimated at about **2,000** per year, and the number of voluntary repatriations with UNHCR assistance at approximately 250 persons per year, the caseload in 2002 is estimated at approximately **8,000** persons. This figure excludes any unpredictable and unforeseeable large and massive influxes..

However, it is estimated that the number of persons of concern in the region is much higher than reflected in the statistics. UNHCR considers that de facto refugees remain in Venezuela, Panama, and Ecuador, mostly Colombians who, in spite of being eligible for international protection and/or assistance, have not requested refugee status for security reasons and/or to avoid stigmatisation. Those opting for formal refugee recognition make-up a minimum part of Colombian nationals present in the region whose entrance is related to generalised violence and/or individualised persecution. Some of them have secured a source of income to support themselves and their families without resorting to UNHCR, particularly in the informal sector. Although it is difficult to evaluate the number of persons of UNHCR concern in the

region, there is evidence of the presence of significant groups of Colombian nationals. In the case of Venezuela, a group of 800 individuals who entered the country during 2000 remain in Rio de Oro, Zulia State. In Ecuador, there are approximately in addition to the registered refugees, another 1000 persons of concern in Sucumbíos Province, and at least 1500 in Imbabura Province. The total number of beneficiaries in 2002 is estimated at 4,000 in Ecuador.

Most Colombian refugees and persons of concern to UNHCR are of rural background and they are located in areas bordering Colombia in Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela. Most of them are mestizo or of African descent and have not completed elementary school. Indigenous groups compose a significant part of the Colombian population of concern to UNHCR (Baris in Venezuela, Kichwas and Kofanes in Ecuador and Emberas in Panama). Individual cases from the former Yugoslavia, Iran and Iraq constitute the largest extra-continental refugee groups. They have an urban background and a secondary/technical education.

Cross-border movements of populations will continue to occur, if the situation within Colombia prevails. Arrivals in countries covered by this Regional Office will further exhaust scarce resources, mainly in the area of health and education. This will add to the increasing tension and fragile security situation in the bordering regions.

It is foreseen that the situation affecting the Colombian departments of Arauca, Norte de Santander, Cesar, Guajira, Putumayo, Nariño, Choco and Antioquia will continue to deteriorate in 2002. Given the strategic importance of border areas, a continuation of the conflict can be expected as different groups in these areas fight for territorial control. Therefore, it is absolutely essential that this Regional Office together with Branch Office Colombia strengthen monitoring on both sides of the borders (Colombia/ Panama, Colombia/Ecuador, Colombia/ Venezuela and Colombia/ Peru). Co-ordination should also be strengthened between the two offices to exchange information, facilitate early warning and voluntary repatriation.

The already fragile security situation in regions that border Colombia in Ecuador, Panama, Venezuela and Peru will continue to be affected as a result of the operation of Colombian armed groups in regions near the borders. Most Colombian refugees and persons of concern to UNHCR are located in these unsafe regions such as Darien (Panama) Sucumbios (Ecuador) and some parts of the Venezuelan states of Zulia, Tachira and Apure. The delicate security situation of these regions will continue to hinder the proper provision of protection to Colombian asylum seekers and refugees and the implementation of projects.

The activities of the Regional Office in the field of protection will continue to be the main focus during the year 2002. In the case of Venezuela, the implementation of law on refugees and asylum-seekers, which according to the Constitution of the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela should be adopted this year, will require institutional and legal measures by the Government. Provision of technical advice to the Government for the establishment of the refugee status determination procedure foreseen by the law and training to central and regional civilian and military authorities will be priority activities of this Regional Office. Furthermore, consolidation of the results of negotiations with the Government carried out in 2001 on crucial issues, such as UNHCR's free access to asylum seekers/refugees in border regions and access of asylum seekers to refugee status determination will also be part of the activities of the Regional Office. In the case of Panama, the Regional Office will further advocate for the harmonisation of National legislation with international standards on the treatment of refugees. Recognition as Convention refugees of Colombians in Darien meeting the 1951 definition will continue to be

strongly supported by the Regional Office. In Ecuador, the restructuring of the refugee status determination procedure established by Decree No. 3301 in order for it to appropriately respond to the increase of refugee status requests will require UNHCR's provision of technical and financial support to the Government.

The tripartite mechanism will form an important aspect of UNHCR's work in the region. This mechanism has shown positive results in the case of Ecuador (Ecu/Col/UNHCR), especially to facilitate voluntary repatriations. During the first trimester of 2001, the tripartite structure has also been experimented within Venezuela.

The emergency preparedness plan for mass influxes of Colombians designed and implemented in the province of Sucumbios, Ecuador and in particular the financial support provided to the implementing agency ISAMIS will be evaluated in early 2002 in order to ensure that it corresponds with needs. The emergency preparedness plan for Darien, Panama, initiated this year will be completed early 2002. Completion of the recommendations of the assessment mission carried out along the Peruvian region bordering Colombia in 2001 will be reached in early 2002. In Venezuela, the provision of technical assistance, in coordination with the Government, for emergency preparedness of central and regional authorities of states bordering Colombia will be a priority in 2002.

The establishment of strategic alliances with various actors in the countries covered, in particular in border regions, will continue to be enhanced in 2002 in order to reinforce the protection and assistance of asylum seekers and refugees. Due to the large geographic size of the countries covered and UNHCR's limited resources, it is essential to count on the support of existing agencies and programmes. The PARinAC process will therefore be an important aspect of the activities of this Regional Office with the main purposes of further consolidating protection networks in Venezuela, Ecuador, Panama and Peru, strengthening NGOs' capacities and responses to refugees, and searching for new means to promote the local integration of refugees.

Coordination with UNDP, PAHO/WHO and UNICEF in Panama will be pursued in particular for the purpose of initiating an inter-agency presence in Darien. This joint presence currently under negotiation with the Government will enable improved border monitoring and enhance the protection of Colombians of concern to UNHCR. Interagency coordination will continue in Ecuador for the purpose of further implementing the emergency preparedness plan for mass influxes of Colombian refugees.

Due to the difficult environment in which UNHCR carries out its Mandate in the region, characterised by adverse public opinion towards refugees and national security of paramount concern, as well as misunderstanding and confusion towards UNHCR's Mandate and refugee law, public information activities and refugee law dissemination activities addressed mainly to Government officials, including the military, will continue to be given priority by the Regional Office and its field offices.

At this point in time, UNHCR activities in the region need to be strengthened rather than phased-down. Given that the regional strategy was adopted only in 1998 and no significant progress has been made in the Colombian peace process, despite the Government's efforts, it is necessary to ensure UNHCR's capacity to respond to the protection and assistance needs of refugees and asylum seekers. The continuous arrival of Colombian asylum seekers in the countries covered by the Office will require that UNHCR maintains a strong presence. The phasing out of some

components of the assistance programmes is foreseeable, including the discontinuation of assistance to urban protracted cases. More emphasis will be placed on UNHCR's catalytic role, as has been done in Ecuador and to a lesser extent in Venezuela, through the identification of available resources in the international or private sectors. Their involvement in refugee projects, for example the IOM's involvement in water and sanitation projects in Sucumbios, Ecuador, will be enhanced.

If the estimated numbers of beneficiaries becomes larger than than the planning conservative figures reflected in the COP, additional resources will be required, and will be sought from Operational Reserve.

In order to be able to accomplish the objectives set out for the year 2002 the Regional Office's present staff structure should be strengthened and under no circumstances reduced. A reduction of the current minimal structure will have a serious negative impact on the accomplishment of UNHCR's Mandate in the region as well as harm the Organisation's image and credibility.

**b) Main Programme Goal(s) and Principal Objectives**

In the past years, UNHCR efforts have concentrated on the strengthening of the legal framework and the emergency response capacity in the region for the protection of Colombian asylum seekers and refugees. In spite of constraints, considerable progress has been made, particularly in Ecuador. Considering the volatile situation in Colombia, the protection of Colombian refugees will continue to be our main focus in 2002, with an emphasis on reinforcing the legal framework and monitoring capacity in border areas. Within this overall framework, the objectives and strategies at the country level will be adapted to the specific conditions of each country.

The main objectives of the Regional Office for the year 2002 can be summarised as follows:

<b>Name of Beneficiary Population/Theme:</b> Asylum-seekers and refugees in Northern Latin America and Panama	
<b>Main Goal(s):</b> Strengthen the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers in Northern Latin America and Panama	
<b>Principal Objectives</b>	<b>Related Outputs</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Asylum-seekers and refugees are admitted to safety and enjoy protection in accordance with international standards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Implementing legislation adopted containing fair and efficient RSD procedures and a gender equality perspective</li> <li>Existing legal framework strengthened through amendment/derogation of provisions falling short of international protection standards</li> <li>Technical support provided to national authorities for the proper implementation of norms related to the treatment of asylum-seekers and refugees</li> <li>Joint fact finding missions between UNHCR and Governments</li> <li>UNHCR supervisory role strengthened through closer co-operation with national authorities</li> <li>Special procedures set up for women asylum-seekers and unaccompanied</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>minors</li> <li>• Analytical reports on country of origin conditions regularly provided</li> <li>• National and regional protection networks with non-governmental actors strengthened</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Durable solutions for refugees are promoted / facilitated, particularly through their local integration in the region.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that all persons in need of protection in the region have access to UNHCR protection and programmes</li> <li>• Agreements concluded to incorporate refugees in public and private programmes</li> <li>• Material assistance gradually discontinued through a more systematic implementation of UNHCR assistance criteria</li> <li>• Repatriation of refugees facilitated with UNHCR support</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emergency preparedness capacity for the arrival of Colombian refugee groups is enhanced.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Governmental contingency plan updated with UNHCR support</li> <li>• Co-ordination mechanisms for contingency issues established</li> <li>• Response capacity in border areas prepared for potential influx of Colombian refugees</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Awareness and better understanding of UNHCR's Mandate and refugee issues are further promoted.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UNHCR work highlighted to the general public and the private sector</li> <li>• Media coverage concerning UNHCR Mandate and Programmes improved</li> <li>• Educational programmes and training expanded to all relevant actors.</li> <li>• Fund Raising mechanism established through the production and distribution of PI materials</li> </ul>