



COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN

OVERVIEW

**Country: Venezuela (covering Peru, Guyana
and Suriname)**

Planning Year: 2006

OVERVIEW

1. Protection and socio-economic operational environment

Protection operational environment:

The Colombian conflict will probably continue to intensify, at least in the foreseeable future, and the number of Colombians seeking safety in neighbouring countries will likewise increase. Human rights violations and generalised conflict have generated a specific type of cross-border population displacement characterised by a large influx of individual cases and small groups to the border areas of neighbouring countries, such as Venezuela. These flows often follow traditional migration movements and cross permeable borders where they mingle with the local population. Likewise, the number of individual cases arriving in larger urban centres has considerably increased, albeit on a smaller scale than the caseload in border areas.

According to the Council on Foreign Relations and the International Crisis Group, the number of Colombians reaching neighbouring countries for protection ranges between 150,000 and 300,000. A survey carried out by *Fundación para la Paz y la Democracia* (FUNPADEM) in 2003, as an attempt to measure the magnitude of the humanitarian crisis, estimated that there are approximately 139,000 Colombians in need of international protection living in more than 150 communities along the Venezuelan border. In this context, official statistics reflect that only a minor percentage of Colombians in need of international protection have managed to access eligibility procedures. Currently there are 4,555 registered asylum-seekers; only 394 individual applications have been processed by the National Refugee Commission (NRC), recognizing 244 refugees.

In 2004, the Venezuelan Government implemented a nationwide temporary programme, called *Misión Identidad*, which facilitates the naturalization and regularization of irregular migrants in the country. The programme did not discriminate between asylum-seekers, refugees or economic (undocumented) migrants. Even though approximately 300,000 persons were documented through *Misión Identidad*, it did not necessarily reach most of the persons of UNHCR's concern. This programme was mainly carried out in urban centres and did not reach dispersed populations living in remote border areas, where many people in need of international protection are concentrated. ROVEN will continue to request that government authorities promote a similar policy in the area of refugees.

Within this context, and in order to effectively respond to the protection needs of UNHCR's persons of concern, the Regional Office (ROVEN) has made efforts to expand and consolidate its presence at the border, providing support to marginalized refugee-hosting communities. As a tool for protection, ROVEN has developed a Community Support and Integration Programme (CSIP) which provides a humanitarian response for people of concern. They mitigate the impact of the refugee influxes in the receiving communities, mainly in border areas, by providing support in the basic areas of health, education and infrastructure. As a means of facilitating protection the CSIPs benefitted 53,000 persons during 2003 and 2004 (both Colombian and Venezuelan) while also improving the level of acceptance in the host communities.

Significant strides have been made in the area of institutional development as marked by the establishment of a National Refugee Council (NRC), as well as its Regional Technical Secretariats (RTS) in three border States: Apure, Tachira, and Zulia. However, as reflected in the number of recognized refugees, there is an urgent need to address the NRC's lack of an adequate operational capacity. UNHCR provides technical support through training and capacity building activities. In 2004, a digitalized registration system was installed and managed by ROVEN, through which the temporary issuance of documentation for refugees

and asylum-seekers has been facilitated with the creation of mechanisms that improve the coordination of ROVEN and its counterparts.

Given the relatively weak presence of civil society organizations, particularly in border areas, networks to enhance protection have been strengthened through fostering strategic alliances with governmental institutions, at national and local level, the Catholic Church, the Ombudsman's Office, NGOs, the media and donors. ROVEN has also strengthened key alliances with other UN agencies, such as UNICEF, UNFPA, OPS and UNDP, by adopting a leadership role in the UN Thematic Border Group and encouraging joint activities, which benefit refugee host communities.

In Peru, during the last two years, especially in 2004, there has been an increase in the number of asylum applications from Colombian citizens. According to the UNHCR's implementing partner (IP), the Peruvian Catholic Commission for Migration (CCPM), small groups of Colombians in need of international protection have managed to enter border communities. However, due to the geographical conditions and security situation of the area, it has been difficult to access them. The Peruvian refugee law institution has adapted to the emerging challenges of the Colombian refugees flow, with the adoption of the Refugee Law (2002) and its implementing regulations (2003). ROVEN has provided technical advice to the Government counterparts.

Socioeconomic operational environment:

Due to the increase in revenue throughout the year, the Venezuelan Government concentrated most of its efforts on enhancing the social, education and general welfare policies through the so-called *misiones*, which became very popular among the general population, without discriminating against refugees and asylum-seekers. The Government benefited greatly from high petroleum prices during 2004. Public expenditure increased by 34%, but, despite the high revenues, poverty only fell to just under 60% and the revenues failed to benefit the entire population. Even though the GDP experienced an unprecedented increase of 17.5% in 2004, according to CEPAL's 2004 Annual Report, it still has not reached the GDP value of 2001 due to the stagnation during 2002 and 2003. Unemployment remained at 15% and inflation reached almost 20%. Given the country's recent oil boom, it has now been able to earmark funds to implement more than \$1.7 billion in welfare programmes targeted at the poor.

Furthermore, new initiatives for developing micro-economies, with the creation of various economic programmes, have played an important role. UNHCR's persons of concern could potentially benefit from the creation of new banks with special credit lines for women, such as the Women's Bank. This social and economic development (projected for 2006) offers an environment for the local integration of UNHCR's persons of concern living legally in Venezuela.

In Venezuela, three electoral processes are due to take place during the period 2005-2006: the election of council members in July 2005, the election of parliamentarians in December 2005 and the presidential election in December 2006. It is expected that public expenditure will be expanded for electoral purposes and channelled to education, health and food programmes.

The economic situation is especially critical in the Venezuelan border states where UNHCR has a presence: Apure, Tachira and Zulia are where most of UNHCR's persons of concern are located. The unemployment and poverty rates in these States continue to increase and according to official reports, over 50% of the population live in poverty and an additional 21.5% live in extreme poverty.

2. Operational goals and potential for durable solutions

Derived from the Americas Bureau's Regional Objectives 2005-2007, the following are the overall strategic goals of ROVEN's programme for 2006:

- a. Persons of UNHCR concern have access to effective protection and assistance, particularly in border areas, through the promotion of *Borders and Cities of Solidarity*.

Due to the deteriorating security conditions in the border areas, ROVEN has developed an emergency response capacity through the elaboration of a contingency plan. In 2006, ROVEN will maintain this capacity in partnership with the Venezuelan Government, UN agencies, civil society and the Church.

In Venezuela, ROVEN has made efforts to expand and consolidate its presence at the border and provide protection and support to marginalized refugee host communities. In 2006, the protection and humanitarian response to the victims of the Colombian conflict will remain a priority, especially in border areas. Due to the security situation, a great number of persons of concern are moving from the border line to more secure communities further inland. ROVEN will consolidate the expansion of its programmes to these geographic areas. Various sources are indicating that protection activities should be extended to the region of Merida, South of the Maracaibo Lake, and Barinas.

In 2006, the CSIP will be consolidated to provide a better response to the humanitarian needs of most persons of concern and host communities. The CSIP is the first step in Venezuela towards a DAR initiative. This approach also responds to the implementation of the Mexico Plan of Action, proposing concrete actions that include the stimulation of social and economic development in border areas to benefit people of concern and the local population (*Borders of Solidarity*), as well as the promotion of self-sufficiency and local integration activities in urban areas (*Cities of Solidarity*), through income-generating activities supported with a micro-credit scheme established in 2005.

Since 2003, the CSIP have benefited some 53,000 persons, Colombians and locals. In 2006, it is expected that by reinforcing and expanding the programme, the cumulative beneficiary figure will be of some 120,000 persons. The projects implemented within the CSIP will continue to follow a rights based and differentiated approach taking into consideration the profile of the people of concern and host communities and addressing the specific needs of women, children and the elderly.

The implementation of UNHCR's policy on gender and age mainstreaming will continue to be a priority. To this end, the strategic framework implemented in Venezuela will be further developed at the regional level. The overriding idea of the framework is to propitiate the enhancement of local capacities and the establishment/consolidation of networks with UN agencies, church and civil society organizations.

As mentioned, the Venezuelan Government has been implementing several social programmes, known as *misiones*, in the areas of education, health and documentation benefiting the most marginalized population in the country. It is noteworthy that UNHCR's persons of concern, including refugees, asylum-seekers and persons who have fled from the Colombian conflict and have not requested asylum, are not discriminated against in these programmes. In this context, one major challenge for ROVEN will be the implementation of its programmes in coordination with State social policies, enhancing the inclusion of UNHCR's people of concern in the Government's initiatives.

A major goal will continue to be the promotion of a comprehensive and unified regional approach, which includes Colombia and other countries affected by the crisis. ROVEN will

work in close coordination with UNHCR in Colombia, as well as with other UNHCR offices in neighbouring countries (Ecuador and Panama) receiving Colombians in need of international protection, and others in the region (Costa Rica and Brazil), to reinforce a common view to better respond to the protection needs of people of UNHCR's concern. This cooperation will also be fostered at the operational level, to deal with situations affecting border regions, such as cross-border displacements, and the negotiation with relevant stakeholders.

In Peru, the monitoring activities in border areas have been carried out with the support of the Catholic Church and the civil authorities from San José del Estrecho. In 2006, ROVEN will reinforce its presence, through protection networks, to respond to the potential protection and humanitarian needs in the border areas.

ROVEN will continue providing material assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers through its IP, the Peruvian Catholic Commission for Migration. UNHCR will also facilitate local integration of protracted refugees in Peru, enhancing attention to their economic and social rights and strengthening the capacity of the IP to provide training, support networks to ensure sources of employment and promote income-generating activities.

b. Legal and institutional frameworks respond to protection needs of persons of UNHCR's concern.

The protection activities planned by ROVEN for 2006 will also contribute to the implementation of the Mexico Plan of Action and the Agenda for Protection. ROVEN will be using these instruments as a guide for setting its priorities in close cooperation with its Government counterparts, both in Venezuela and Peru.

In Venezuela, the major challenge for ROVEN will be the effective implementation of an asylum response to the large numbers of Colombians in need of protection, particularly addressing the protection needs of those in border areas. The establishment of the NRC and its RTSs has been a significant institutional development. However, given the numbers of recognized refugees (244), there is an urgent need to address the lack of an adequate operational capacity. During 2005 and 2006, ROVEN will reinforce its capacity-building activities with refugee-related authorities, through technical advice and training. Regarding the lack of efficiency of the RSD processing by the NRC, continued coaching and streamlining of the operational procedures is required to develop standards of compliance with the legal deadlines and respect for the needs of asylum-seekers.

While the institutional capacity of the NRC will have to be reinforced as a matter of priority to improve the quality of decision-making and to promote a more liberal application of the provisions of the 1951 Convention, capacity-building activities need to be extended to other structures, such as the Migration Police (ONIDEX) and the military. In this context ROVEN will intensify its efforts to encourage the Government to develop security-control policies that do not jeopardize refugee protection. It still remains a challenge for ROVEN to ensure that increasing security-control measures in border areas do not undermine protection safeguards.

In 2004, a digitalized registration system was installed and managed by ROVEN, through which a temporary issuance of documentation for refugees and asylum-seekers has been facilitated with the creation of mechanisms that improves the coordination and efficiency of the process for ROVEN and its IPs. There is a need for ensuring a progressive assumption of the registry function by the Government and a full compliance with the documentary responsibility. For 2006, it is expected that the registration process will be managed by the NRC, and the official documentation will be issued by the ONIDEX.

In the spirit of the 1984 Cartagena Declaration, ROVEN will pursue efforts for developing a more operational and effective implementing legislation for a large number of persons in refugee-like situations in border areas. UNHCR will pay particular attention to the use made by the concerned authorities of temporary protection regimes and the like. ROVEN will continue ensuring the identification of special protection needs of vulnerable cases (separated children, disabled, traumatized, vulnerable women, the elderly) and address them. In order to implement this objective, an essential component is proper training of the refugee-related authorities and staff of IPs, as they are the first to have contact with these cases.

In Peru, important achievements have been made to strengthen the capacity of the Special Refugee Commission (SRC) to efficiently implement national legal instruments relating to refugees. ROVEN will continue assisting the government in RSD issues, through liaison and capacity-building.

ROVEN will also continue to reinforce its cooperation with the authorities at all levels to ensure that the Government of Peru will maintain an open attitude towards refugees and will continue to cooperate with UNHCR to guarantee fair asylum policies and practices and internationally acceptable protection standards.

Protection priorities for 2006 aim to ensure that Peru grants protection to Colombians crossing the border and remaining in isolated communities, in conformity with the 1951 Convention and other regional standards of refugee protection. The fruitful cooperation between authorities and refugee-assisting IPs will be further promoted by ROVEN.

UNHCR will continue to encourage the Government of Guyana to accede to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol. Contacts and further cooperation with the Government, civil society and UN agencies will be reinforced to highlight the advantages of subscribing to these international instruments. With respect to Suriname, contacts with government actors, civil society and UN agencies will be maintained to ensure proper coverage and follow-up of potential refugee cases.

- c. Networks and alliances are strengthened to increase political support and operational capacity.

The magnitude of the humanitarian impact of the Colombian conflict requires a coordinated regional response from UNHCR and its partners. In order to achieve this goal ROVEN will diversify and reinforce alliances with key strategic actors, including governments, civil society and UN agencies. In this context, improved coordination with and among national government institutions will be one of the key priorities in 2005 and 2006.

In Venezuela, ROVEN has witnessed a significant improvement in the extent and quality of support provided by its IPs. This advancement has been especially notable in *Caritas de Venezuela*, which has expanded its presence in border areas and demonstrated an improved planning and technical capacity in the implementation of the CSIP. For 2006, ROVEN will reinforce its networks and alliances. Geographically, partnerships with national authorities, civil society and the Church in new rural and urban areas in the three bordering states will be established to ensure that an increased number of persons of concern have access to effective protection. New areas and partnerships need to be identified. Having more actors involved in protection related activities and larger strategic alliances, would generate stronger support for UNHCR's mandate and operations.

As a matter of priority, the strengthening of protection networks requires interaction with refugee-related authorities, civil society actors, the Church and other UN agencies. In this

respect the extended protection networks and alliances have been fortified both in Caracas and the border areas. Persons of UNHCR concern have been able to integrate into national governmental initiatives, facilitating their access to health, education, vocational training and employment. ROVEN has also been associating a wider range of actors from civil society with protection response activities such as the *Grupo Refugio*, composed of human rights NGOs and universities. It is important to note that a special chapter on cooperation with universities led to the signature of the Sergio Vieira de Mello Chair with two universities as well as the adoption of a comprehensive agenda for 2005. There are plans for continued action in these areas and there will be a proposal for activities during 2006.

ROVEN has also strengthened key alliances with other UN agencies, such as UNICEF, UNFPA, OPS and UNDP, by adopting a leadership role in the UN Thematic Border Group and UNCT for border area issues. The cooperation with other UN agencies will further develop in 2005 and plans are proposed to strengthen the UN Thematic Border Group in a complementary approach in 2006.

ROVEN has played a catalytic role in the gradual adhesion of various organizations for the development of a more efficient humanitarian network in the region. However, the network is still limited and fragile due to the weaknesses of civil society organizations, especially in border areas. ROVEN's main IPs are church-related organizations. The association of UNHCR with the Catholic Church is strategic in the sense that it grants UNHCR access to national and regional networks that are already well-established, thus enforcing UNHCR's credibility among host communities. In this context, the alliance of ROVEN with the Church will be reinforced by continuing to hold annual regional conferences with the Catholic Bishops from Colombia and neighbouring countries to enhance the humanitarian agenda in the region and advocate for persons of concern.

In Peru, given the weak presence of civil society organizations, particularly in border areas, networks to enhance the protection regime have been strengthened through the fostering of strategic alliances with the Church, media, government institutions, the Ombudsperson's office at the national, state and municipal level, and by encouraging other UN agency activities in border areas where endemic poverty, inequality and marginalization rank among the worst in the country.