

A woman with dark hair, wearing a vibrant, multi-colored blouse, is smiling and looking upwards. She is holding a large basket filled with white flowers. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with green foliage.

# Central America and Mexico

## Major Developments

In Costa Rica, the number of asylum-seekers and refugees from Colombia increased by 41 per cent in 2001; 5,018 Colombians requested asylum (as compared to 1,456 the previous year), 2,126 of whom were recognised as refugees. In El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico the number of Colombians requesting asylum was three to ten times higher than the previous year (please also see Mexico chapter). There was an increase in asylum applications of 140 per cent for the region as a whole.

Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala all experienced serious economic crises in 2001. Natural disasters such as Hurricane Mitch and earthquakes added to the challenges faced by governments and populations alike in these countries.

After 36 years of internal conflict in Guatemala, the process of democratisation within the framework of peace and reconciliation is still fragile. However, in 2001 few Guatemalans took the well-trodden path into Mexico (28 persons were registered and recognised as refugees by the Government of

Belize  
Costa Rica  
El Salvador  
Guatemala  
Honduras  
Nicaragua



Mexico). The Government of Guatemala adopted refugee legislation in October and established a National Eligibility Committee with UNHCR's support the following month.

## Challenges and Concerns

UNHCR continued to advocate enhancement of the legal framework for the protection of asylum-seekers and refugees and the establishment of status determination procedures, particularly within the context of the Regional Conference on Migration (Puebla Process).

Strengthening the capacity of governmental and non-governmental institutions to protect and assist asylum-seekers and refugees continued to be a key priority in 2001. UNHCR concentrated on reinforcing and broadening protection networks, consisting of NGOs and other institutions, to secure the protection of asylum-seekers and refugees as well as assist in their local integration.

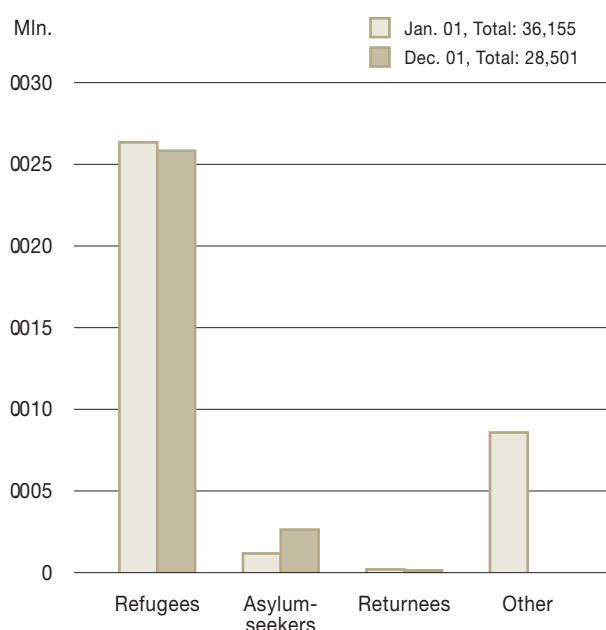
In Costa Rica, the main challenge was to cope with the new influx of refugees arriving in the country, mainly from Colombia or from outside the southern American region. UNHCR focused on improving the Government's response capacity, in particular in relation to resolution of asylum claims.

## Progress Toward Solutions

UNHCR continued to encourage local integration as a durable solution for long-staying refugees, through naturalisation or regularisation of their migratory status. In Guatemala and Nicaragua, governmental changes at the operational and policy-making levels within the Ministry of the Interior and the Department of Migration affected progress in some of UNHCR's key objectives, such as regularising the status of long-staying refugees and training activities.

In Belize, the Government and UNHCR maintained a friendly dialogue on reconvening the Eligibility Committee, but by the year's end the Committee still

## Persons of Concern to UNHCR



had not met. Following interventions by UNHCR and civil society actors, judges have reportedly stopped detaining or levying fines on asylum-seekers for illegal entry into the country.

In El Salvador, Honduras, and Nicaragua, UNHCR continued to press for the adoption of implementing legislation and procedures. In El Salvador, the Director of Migration and a representative of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs agreed to start implementing ad hoc refugee status determination procedures included in the draft implementing legislation currently before the National Assembly.

Due to presidential elections in Honduras, the approval process for the Honduran draft Law on Migration was considerably delayed. At the end of the year it was expected that the Legislative Assembly would review the law during the first quarter of 2002. The Refugee Department began using interview forms provided by UNHCR to rationalise the current ad hoc refugee status determination procedure.

Progress on objectives in Nicaragua was also slowed by presidential elections during 2001 with the General Directorate of Migration processing only three asylum claims (with 21 cases pending at year's end). At year's end a new Immigration Law was under review by the Presidency, prior to review by Congress.

The sudden influx of Colombians in Costa Rica overwhelmed the Government's Migration Department for Refugees, leading to a large backlog of asylum claims. To strengthen local capacity and work on the backlog, UNHCR dispatched an emergency refugee status determination team for an initial three-month period starting in June, and subsequently extended for another three months. This had a rapid effect on the rate of resolution of asylum claims (bringing the average waiting period down from eight to three months).

## Operations

In **Costa Rica**, a total of 998 asylum seekers and refugees received support in the form of either an "installation grant" or a subsistence allowance for an average of three months. A psychologist was hired to treat numerous cases of trauma/torture, particularly among Colombians.

In **Guatemala**, a list of 469 refugees, most of them Central Americans, who had lived there for five years or more, was presented in November 2001 to the General Directorate for Migration for the eventual issuance of permanent residence or Guatemalan nationality. 729 new refugees (503 Nicaraguans, 176 Salvadorans, seven Hondurans and 43 of other nationalities) were also recognised, 370 of whom were given general and legal advice and financial assistance.

In **Belize**, 109 refugees (61 female) were helped to regularise their legal status while nine asylum-seekers in possession of valid travel documents were able to extend their visitor's visas until the Eligibility Committee reconvened.

In **El Salvador**, UNHCR helped 70 Nicaraguan refugees (52 women) to submit requests for naturalisation (with completion of processing expected in 2002). Approximately 300 more cases are to be reviewed via a special process. The annual meeting of the regional protection network was held in San Salvador in June with 24 participants. This year, the meeting was expanded to include representatives of national migration organisations, and representatives from Mexico, with a view to promoting the incorporation of civil society views into regional migration legislation.



In **Honduras**, six Haitian refugees (out of seven cases submitted) received permanent residency with support from UNHCR's implementing partner. Eleven refugees were supported in their requests for renewal of work permits and refugee identity cards.

In **Nicaragua**, ten Salvadoran refugees were naturalised with support from UNHCR's implementing partner. However, 324 Salvadoran refugees are still waiting for their files to be processed.

In **Mexico**, UNHCR organised its first seminar on Refugee Status Determination for migration officials from Mexico, Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica. A total of 19 migration officials attended (seven of them women) along with a representative from each of UNHCR's implementing partners in the region.

Training events, conferences, and workshops were held throughout the year to promote the concepts of refugee rights, human rights, and gender equity. The specific needs of women and their rights continued to be a high priority of the Office. The fifth annual Regional Gender team was held in San Jose, Costa Rica in November. The team focused its efforts on identifying and prioritising recommendations from the refugee and IDP consultation meetings in Mexico, Colombia and Switzerland to ensure the advancement of the region's gender mainstreaming agenda in the coming year.

In the first quarter of the year, public information activities in Central America focused primarily on the commemoration of World Refugee Day and the 50th Anniversary of the 1951 Convention. The Respect campaign was well-covered on television channels in Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Belize and Mexico, and in the print media in Mexico. Awareness activities were organised in El Salvador, Guatemala and Mexico, including two photo and two poster exhibitions. In Costa Rica, the media covered the successful launch of "The State of the World's Refugees 2000" at the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

A UNHCR Spanish website was designed and launched in San Jose, Costa Rica during the course of 2001, with financial support from UNHCR Offices in Latin America, Spain and the Depart-

ment of International Protection. The Spanish website is an important protection and dissemination tool in the Americas and Spain, and includes a legal database.



Guatemala: Returnee family. UNHCR / T. Bolstad

## Funding

Due to budgetary constraints, the Area Service Centre in Costa Rica was closed and responsibility for regional co-ordination of gender activities was absorbed by the Liaison Office in Costa Rica. Furthermore, the rotation of some key staff interrupted the work of the regional gender team.

Two training seminars planned for Belize, one aimed at civil society and the other for Migration Officials and Border Police, were also cancelled. Community Service activities for children, adolescents, and women in Guatemala were not carried out because of budgetary constraints. Activities for refugee women on the prevention of and response to sexual and domestic violence were financed under a project funded by the Canadian Aid Agency.

Voluntary Contributions – Restricted (USD)			
		Annual Programme Budget	
Donor	Earmarking <sup>1</sup>	Income	Contribution
Sweden	Central America	312,500	312,500
<i>España con ACNUR (SPA)</i>	Mexico	20,741	47,651
<b>TOTAL<sup>2</sup></b>		<b>333,241</b>	<b>360,151</b>

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the various earmarkings, please refer to the Donor Profiles.

<sup>2</sup> Total funds available for obligation in the region also included unrestricted voluntary contributions, lightly restricted contributions, opening balances and adjustments.

Budget and Expenditure (USD)		
	Revised Budget	Expenditure
Country	Annual Programme Budget	
Costa Rica	1,022,456	943,780
Mexico	4,820,727	4,792,295
Regional Projects <sup>1</sup>	806,991	745,510
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>6,650,174</b>	<b>6,481,585</b>

<sup>1</sup> Includes activities in Belize, Costa Rica, Cuba, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua, emergency assistance to earthquake victims in El Salvador, the Area Service Centre and regional support for gender equity and protection.