

# Central America

## Recent Developments

Growing violence and the deteriorating humanitarian situation in Colombia continues to affect Central America and other countries in the hemisphere. Of the countries in the sub-region, Costa Rica has been hardest hit, and registered a seven-fold increase in the number of Colombians seeking asylum over the past year. It is likely that the total will reach 1,100 by the end of 2000. This increase underscores the urgent need for a revised administrative and political framework to co-ordinate the government's action regarding refugees.

Mexico's accession in April 2000 to the 1951 Convention on Refugees and the 1967 Protocol was a major step forward for refugee protection. Guatemalan refugees continued to consolidate their local integration in the country, principally through naturalisation. It is projected that by the end of 2000 nearly 4,700 refugees will have become Mexican citizens.

In Guatemala, the protection and assistance network *Red de Protección y Asistencia a Refugiados y Asilados* (REPARA) was set up in 2000. It consists of more than 20 key government ministries and departments, churches, NGOs, academic institutions and human rights organisations.

Belize  
Costa Rica  
El Salvador  
Guatemala  
Honduras  
Mexico  
Nicaragua



REPARA's new role as an advocate for refugee interests is timely, coinciding with the official closure of the UNHCR reintegration operation for Guatemalan refugees on 7 September 2000 and the downsizing of UNHCR's presence in the country. REPARA is now seeking formal recognition by the Government of Guatemala.

In 2000 some progress was made in naturalising Central American refugees in Nicaragua and El Salvador, but Nicaragua's weak economy limits prospects for sustainable local integration. Belize also continued to regularise the status of long-staying Central Americans, through its amnesty programme. In September the government of El Salvador submitted a draft refugee law to the country's Parliament for final approval. UNHCR has been promoting refugee legislation in El Salvador for over a decade and will continue to lobby Parliament in an effort to secure rapid passage of the law.

### Strategic Objectives

In 2001, UNHCR's main objectives in the region are to: strengthen the capacity of governmental and non-governmental institutions to protect and assist asylum-seekers and refugees; promote durable solutions for long-staying refugees through naturalisation or regularising their status as migrants; and strength-

en the legal framework for the protection of asylum-seekers and refugees and press for the establishment of bodies to determine refugee status, with UNHCR's support and guidance.

In line with UNHCR's protection strategy throughout the Americas, the Office will progressively hand over responsibilities for direct assistance and protection to governments, NGOs and other members of civil society. UNHCR will strengthen its advisory and monitoring role in the region and continue to support regional protection networks. The Office will also concentrate on strengthening consultation and co-operation among national protection networks, with the aim of building stronger regional links and sharing lessons of common challenges and best practices to address them.

In 2001, UNHCR will also continue to raise awareness of refugee issues in the region within a context of increasing migration. Training on refugee law will encourage commitment to and respect for international obligations towards refugees and asylum-seekers. Given the possibility of influxes of refugees from within and outside the region, UNHCR will continue to sensitise governments to the need to engage in contingency planning. Faced with the growing phenomenon of mixed movements of population (i.e. including economic migrants and other categories) UNHCR will continue to

encourage states to ensure that their migration laws and policies take due account of their international obligations towards refugees.

As part of UNHCR's decentralisation process and regional protection/solutions strategy, an Area Service Centre (ASC) was established in Costa Rica in 2000. The ASC will support field operations in the Americas region and advise on protection, gender and children's issues, resource management and information technology. Key protection-related objectives in 2001 include: (i) the development of a regional protection-training strategy; (ii) closer co-operation with the Inter-American Court of Human Rights (ICHR) and the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights (IACHR); and (iii) the development of a legal database in Spanish on refugee issues. The ASC will continue to support the integration of a gender perspective throughout the Americas through regional training on the new gender-sensitive refugee status determination forms and eligibility procedures, improved People-Oriented Planning training, and dissemination and region-wide application of protection guidelines on refugee women. The regional gender team will continue to play a catalytic role throughout the region, implementing UNHCR's gender strategy in all aspects of UNHCR's work in the Americas. A recent evaluation confirmed that efforts to adopt a gender perspective have had a direct and positive impact on the lives of refugee women. In the area of resource management, the ASC will provide financial monitoring support to field offices, facilitate the budget review process in the field, and offer ongoing guidance on programme and administrative matters.

## Operations

The population of concern to UNHCR in Central America decreased from 54,300 in 1999 to 25,000 at the end of 2000. This reduction was due primarily to the amnesty programme in Belize and to the refugee naturalisation programme in Mexico. While the majority of the remaining population of concern continues to be long-staying refugees from Central America, asylum-seekers from outside the region make up a significant proportion of new arrivals. **Mexico** has

the largest refugee programme in the region, and is covered in a separate chapter.

In **Belize**, the amnesty project allowing foreigners, including unregistered refugees, to regularise their migratory status is expected to be completed in 2000. In 2001, UNHCR will continue to advocate the re-establishment of the Belizean eligibility committee, and provide training for government officials on refugee status determination. UNHCR will also continue to monitor new arrivals to ensure that protection and assistance needs are met, and encourage the regularisation of the legal status of the remaining long-staying refugee population.



In **Costa Rica**, the sharp increase in the number of Colombian asylum-seekers in the past six months has strained government departments, particularly those dealing with asylum claims. By September, 663 Colombians had applied for refugee status. At the time of writing, more than two-thirds of these applications were still pending a decision due to delays in the system. Current trends suggest that there will be about

1,100 Colombian asylum-seekers by the end of 2000, with more expected in 2001. Smaller numbers of asylum-seekers are also arriving from elsewhere in South America and outside the region, principally from Africa and Eastern Europe. UNHCR will advocate rapid examination of their claims and provide training and legal advice for officers processing asylum applications. Emergency assistance, in the form of subsistence allowances and medical aid, will also be provided for new refugees and for needy individuals. Particular attention will be given to unaccompanied women, and women heads of household, through psychological counselling and legal assistance to victims of gender-based violence. UNHCR will continue to



co-operate closely with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the hope of identifying a government counterpart to deal with refugee policy, as DIGEPARE (*Dirección General para la Protección y Ayuda al Refugiado*), UNHCR's former counterpart on refugee policy, was closed in June 2000. An intensive awareness-raising campaign was conducted by UNHCR in 2000 for key government offices, the media and NGOs to

highlight the need for an approach to refugee influxes focusing on the need for protection, assistance and documentation. UNHCR will concentrate on enhancing the capacity of its counterparts to respond more rapidly and appropriately to new influxes through a training programme for Immigration Board officials and tighter co-operation with the protection network. UNHCR will also continue to support the government's efforts to amend legislation on immigration, for which the Office has been requested to draft a chapter on refugees.

UNHCR will maintain a limited presence with one international consultant and two national staff in **Guatemala** in 2001. In order to improve refugee protection, UNHCR will urge: the adoption of legislation implementing the 1951 Convention and 1967 Protocol; the establishment of a national eligibility commission; the identification of durable solutions for long-staying refugees (mostly Central Americans); and strengthening of the REPARA protection and assistance network. When REPARA presents itself officially to the Guatemalan government, it will press for an amnesty granting Guatemalan citizenship to long-staying refugees as well as encourage the passage of national refugee legislation. Limited assistance will continue to be provided for certain individuals. Among activities benefiting children will be preventive training, particularly for unaccompanied minors, to reduce the chances of possible future physical and sexual abuse. UNHCR will also continue to support the reintegration of Guatemalan returnees by participating in the UN Inter-agency Group on Uprooted Populations and monitoring legal access to land by returnee women.

In **El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua**, the emphasis in 2001 will be on ensuring adequate protection for asylum-seekers and refugees in accordance with international standards, working in close collaboration with the national authorities. UNHCR will: advocate the establishment of ad hoc refugee status determination procedures; continue to press for the adoption of national refugee legislation; and, when requested, assist governments to revise the chapters of the migration law relevant to refugees. UNHCR will strengthen the national protection networks in these three countries, continuing to support existing national focal points, identifying new actors and incorporating them into the networks. In addition, a training programme on refugee law will be implemented for government officials as well as for NGOs involved in protection networks.

#### BUDGET (USD)

Country	Annual Programme
Costa Rica	749,026
Guatemala	189,400
Mexico	5,866,925
Regional Project <sup>1</sup>	937,900
<b>Total</b>	<b>7,743,251</b>

<sup>1</sup> Includes activities in Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua.