



COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN

Executive Committee Summary

Country: Venezuela

Planning Year: 2005

REGIONAL OFFICE FOR NORTHERN SOUTH AMERICA

2005 COUNTRY OPERATIONS PLAN

PART I: Executive Committee Summary (Regional Overview)

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

I. Introduction

Over the last few years, the expansion and intensification of Colombia's domestic conflict has compelled an increasing number of Colombians to seek protection in neighbouring countries. In order to enhance international protection and seek durable solutions, the Regional Office in Venezuela (ROVEN) has adopted a regional-based approach to the Colombian refugee situation, which covers three of the countries bordering Colombia (Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru), along with Suriname and Guyana. ROVEN also operates in close co-ordination with the Branch Office in Bogotá (BOCOL) in formulating joint strategies to better respond to internal and external displacement.

At the regional level, the countries most affected by the Colombian conflict are Ecuador, Venezuela, Panama and Costa Rica. In Ecuador, almost 900 asylum seekers arrive each month. Venezuela registered a total of 2,280 asylum seekers in the last quarter of 2003. In Peru and Brazil, the impact of the Colombian conflict has been mitigated by the area's low population density¹ and the fact that the Amazon jungle presents a natural barrier to large population movements. Nevertheless, an influx into Peru of Colombian nationals fleeing the conflict has been observed along the Ecuadorian border.² UNHCR figures do not reflect the real number of potential asylum seekers and persons of concern in neighbouring countries. As reported by the Council on Foreign Relations and the International Crisis Group, the numbers of Colombians seeking protection in neighbouring countries may range from 100,000 to 300,000. For its part, the Government of Ecuador estimates that there are 250,000 Colombians and the Venezuelan Government's estimates range from 2 to 3 million.

In response to the above, the Regional Office has adopted a strategy built upon a community-based approach and on enhancing the institutional response.

Within its regional strategy, ROVEN has identified the following priorities:

- Ensure the right to seek asylum and respond to humanitarian needs in border areas
- Consolidate the national legal framework
- Develop and strengthen protection networks

In Venezuela and Ecuador, activities have focused on the implementation of Quick Impact Projects (QIPs), designed to support both the host and the refugee population. Protection efforts by the "Refugee Registration and Documentation Project" along the

¹ At the Colombian side of the border.

² The total of 141 cases, received in 2003 in Peru, nearly doubles the number of asylum applications registered between 2000 and 2002. Furthermore, approximately 75% of all asylum claims were submitted by Colombian nationals.

Venezuelan border have also been increased. This project has been complemented by the capacity building of State authorities and the implementation of a “PI Registration Awareness Campaign” that aims at informing potential asylum seekers of their rights, obligations and the asylum application process.

Over the last two years, the Regional Office has assisted in developing national refugee legislation, strengthened RSD procedures and created a regional protection network. Following the Ecuadorian experience, ROVEN has actively promoted the creation of Venezuela’s National Refugee Commission and is currently providing technical, legal and organizational support to this new institution. The Office will also further develop the establishment of common registration systems and exchange of best practices.

In order to facilitate durable solutions for individuals facing personal security threats in their asylum country, a US-funded resettlement programme in Quito, Ecuador, is responsible for covering resettlement operations, mainly to the US. During 2003, a total of 157 individuals were resettled. In the upcoming year, this programme will be further consolidated.

II. Political Context: Colombia and Neighbouring Countries

The intensification of Colombia’s domestic armed conflict compelled an increasing number of Colombians to seek protection in neighbouring countries. At the same time, a situation of heightened political instability in the Northern South American region overshadowed important border security and refugee issues; thus the humanitarian aspect of the conflict was dominated by national security concerns. In general, the Colombian conflict has contributed to a significant rise in xenophobia against Colombians throughout the region.

The worsening of the conflict has contributed to a gradual militarization of the border area and the establishment of security agreements between the Government of Colombia and those of its neighbours. Given the predominance of the security agenda and the growing stigmatization of Colombians (as kidnappers and drug traffickers), UNHCR fears that these measures might weaken established protection regimes and lead to restrictive protection practices in the region.

Rising political and economic instability in the Andean region is expected to exacerbate restrictive protection regimes as the ongoing influx of Colombians has a serious financial and political impact on neighbouring countries. In Venezuela, the Government has repeatedly been accused of sheltering Colombian irregular armed actors while in Ecuador, the economic impact and the issue of burden-sharing have been repeatedly highlighted by the Government.

III. Security situation

The level of violence has further increased, particularly in border areas. In 2003 and 2004 the political instability in Venezuela affected both the Regional Office in Caracas and the Field/Antenna Offices at the border, and there is no indication that this is likely to change in 2005.

Most Colombian refugees, asylum-seekers and persons of concern are located in border regions. General statistics regarding common crimes, homicides and kidnappings continue to show an increase, both at the border areas and in the capital cities throughout the region. In essence, the security of UNHCR's beneficiaries, Implementing Partners and Staff is becoming of greater concern and requires additional attention in full co-operation with the UN Resident Representative and the UN Security Officer.

III. Protection Issues

The major challenge for ROVEN will be the effective implementation of an asylum response to the large number of Colombians in need of protection. In Ecuador, the protection response to all Colombians arriving and the effective running of institutions will be consolidated. While preserving the current response capacity as regards protection and assistance to refugees and asylum-seekers, the special need to find alternative solutions for persons whose asylum-requests have been rejected will be addressed at the persistent request of the Ecuadorian Government. The main challenge for Venezuela is the improvement of institutions in areas where there is a large presence of Colombians in need of protection. In Peru, the priority is to ensure refugee access to effective RSD procedures in accordance with the emerging needs.

With the exception of Guyana, the countries covered by ROVEN have ratified the 1951 Convention and its 1967 Protocol and the Regional Office will concentrate efforts on ensuring that Guyana ratifies these international refugee instruments.

The Resettlement Unit in Quito will continue its efforts to increase the rate of acceptance of cases falling outside the physical protection criteria, as outlined in the UNHCR Resettlement Handbook, and extend its activities to Peru and Venezuela.

IV. UNHCR's Role

The Regional Office will reinforce the monitoring capacity in border areas and further develop the protection response to facilitate the registration of asylum seekers, their documentation and the progressive re-establishment of their rights. UNHCR will continue to strengthen government institutions involved in RSD through training and capacity building. UNHCR will also play a catalytic role in involving other actors in protection delivery areas such as registration, protection needs-analysis and protection-response. In border areas, UNHCR will ensure that a humanitarian space is maintained. Moreover, UNHCR will co-ordinate efforts for the implementation of QIPs in local border communities to better assist refugees throughout their integration process.

V. Overview of Beneficiary Population

The dramatic widening and aggravation of Colombia's conflict has directly affected Colombia's border departments with Ecuador and Venezuela. Human rights violations and the generalised conflict have generated a type of forced displacement that is characterised by a large influx of individual cases and small groups to the border areas of neighbouring countries. These flows often follow traditional population movements and cross permeable borders where they mingle with the local population. Likewise,

the number of individuals from Colombia who arrive in larger urban centres has considerably increased, albeit on a smaller scale than the caseload in border areas. Most victims of Colombia's conflict who seek protection in the border areas of neighbouring countries fulfil the elements of the refugee definition. However, plagued by a constant fear of being forced to return to Colombia or traced by armed groups from the Colombian side of the border, these groups and individual cases thus hide within local border communities or shanty towns of smaller urban centres close to the border.

The vast majority of Colombians in need of protection in border areas are women and children from rural areas, of mestizo or Africo-colombian descent with only very basic education. Equally, the indigenous population constitutes a significant part of the rural refugee group of concern to UNHCR and the social characteristics of these two groups add to the complexity of the overall refugee population. In most of the cases death threats, targeted persecution and/or indiscriminate massacres by guerrilla groups or paramilitaries cause the forced displacement of the refugee population.

Against this background, the presence of UNHCR and the implementation of Quick Impact Projects (QIPs) at key border entry points are indispensable to improving the living conditions of the refugees and raising awareness within the local population, with the relevant authorities but also building confidence with people in need of protection. In terms of protection, the main impact of this strategy has been the development of a constructive relationship between the local population, the Colombians and UNHCR and its operational partners. As a result, people in need of protection have gradually approached the agency to file asylum requests and/or obtain information on rights and procedures.

The population of concern to UNHCR for 2005 is expected to have much the same characteristics as the present. The assumption of a proportional increase of the refugee population seems reasonable, taking into account the recent legal and institutional developments and the current context prevailing in Colombia. However, it is essential to be aware that the evolution of the refugee population depends on several external factors such as the functioning of the National Refugee Commission, the refugee policy applied, the evolution of the Colombian conflict and the relations between both countries.

VI. Policy Issues

The implementation of UNHCR's policy on gender mainstreaming and children will continue to be a priority. To this end, the strategic framework discussed and agreed with UNHCR's partners at the October 2003 workshop in San Cristobal, Venezuela, will be further developed at the regional level and reviewed as appropriate. The overriding idea of the framework is to reconcile the enhancement of local capacities and the establishment/consolidation of networks with UN agencies, church and civil society organizations. The methodology of the framework is based upon the following:

- Harmonization of concepts and information about institutional policies, including: UN concepts related to gender mainstreaming and children's rights; UNHCR's policy on refugee women and children and SGBV guidelines;

governments' legal framework and policies for the protection of women and children.

- Better understanding of the situation of women/children/vulnerable persons of UNHCR's concern, considering the situation of IDPs in Colombia (*background information*); the situation of women and children in border areas; the specific needs and main constraints faced by these specific groups.
- The development of an integrated gender-sensitive strategy by: incorporating a gender perspective in all UNHCR's activities in all sectors and addressing children issues; integrating persons of UNHCR's concern in public programmes, securing equal access to both men and women and making sure that a gender perspective is duly respected within the UN thematic group in support of UNHCR's programmes.

VIII. Linkages with other Countries within a Defined "Situation"

A major goal for UNHCR is to promote a comprehensive and unified approach to internal and external displacement that includes Colombia and the countries affected by the crisis. Therefore, the Regional Office will work in close co-ordination with BOCOL, as well as with the Representation in Panama. This cooperation will also be fostered at the operational level to deal with situations affecting specific border regions, such as cross border displacements, and negotiations with relevant stakeholders. ROVEN will continue to support the Representation in Panama in programme and administration related issues. At the broader regional level, ROVEN also fosters cross-fertilization efforts between the Resettlement Units in Ecuador and Cost Rica.

IX. Capacity and Presence of Implementing Partners

Over the past three years, UNHCR 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, particularly in border areas. The main UNHCR implementing partners are Church-related organizations. The association of UNHCR with the Catholic Church is strategic in the sense that it grants UNHCR access to national networks that are already well-established, thus enforcing UNHCR's credibility among the receiving communities.

In line with the recommendations of the first regional encounter with the Catholic Bishops Conferences from Colombia and the neighbouring countries, the alliance with UNHCR will be reinforced in order to enhance the humanitarian agenda in the region and advocate for the victims of the Colombian conflict.

At the operational level, networks should be further strengthened, through the incorporation of new partners and the development of IP capacities. During 2005, the main focus will be to further support refugee-receiving communities by involving public authorities and key strategic stakeholders in a more systematic manner.

X. Presence and Role of Other UN agencies and International Organizations and Coordination Efforts

Co-operation with UN agencies and international organizations is a main priority for UNHCR strategy. The objective is to support persons of UNHCR's concern through the implementation of complementary programmes in border regions. For this purpose, a UN Thematic Group in Ecuador and Venezuela has been established and operational arrangements are under negotiation. By 2005, within a comprehensive Plan of Action coordinated by UNHCR, a number of projects will be implemented to enhance the protection and improve the quality of life of the Colombian population. This initiative will also count on the support of the most relevant international NGOs working in the Andean countries. At the regional level, the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) and the Project Counselling Service (PCS) will actively contribute to UNHCR operations in border areas. The coordination with other key actors will be fostered, such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), and new partnership arrangements will be explored with international NGOs (i.e. Catholic Relief Service, OXFAM, Médecins-Sans-Frontières)

XI. Solutions

A solutions-oriented policy for the region can only be consistently tackled through a regional approach. The regional policy on durable solutions should take due account of the following key aspects:

- Promotion of a humanitarian agenda amongst key players including Governments, UN sister agencies, NGOs, the Church, Red Cross and donors, so as to contribute more effectively to the protection of persons of UNHCR's concern in the region.
- In parallel, given the nature of the Colombian influxes, particularly in the border and rural areas in Ecuador and Venezuela, a community development approach will be pursued to support host communities and thereby reinforce protection mechanisms by reducing tensions with the local population.
- UNHCR will continue, when possible, to facilitate voluntary repatriation of Colombians through tripartite mechanisms. Advocacy of international standards and combined action with BOCOL will be pursued, in the case of bi-national initiatives.
- Resettlement activities will continue at the regional level and through the Resettlement Unit in Ecuador mainly for physical protection cases, but also for women at risk, lack of local integration possibilities and other cases falling under UNHCR's standard resettlement criteria.

XII. Administrative Considerations

In recent years, ROVEN's administrative priority has been focused on ensuring a minimal UNHCR presence in key border areas. Serious efforts need to continue to ensure that each Field Office and staff meet MOSS.

In addition to the main office in **Caracas**, ROVEN has established over the past four years the following sub-offices:

- Venezuela: **San Cristobal** (Tachira), **Guasdalito** (Apure), **Machiques** (Zulia)

- Ecuador: **Quito, Lago Agrio** (Sucumbios) and **Ibarra** (Imbambura)

During 2004, new office locations were found for each of the Field/Antenna Offices and also for ROVEN. The goal for 2005 is to ensure that offices are sufficiently equipped and staffed to carry out their functions. This process is reflected in the proposed staffing charts and budgets annexed to this submission.

b) Main Programme Goal(s) and Principal Objectives

Name of Beneficiary Population/Theme: Asylum-seekers, refugees and Colombians in need of protection in Northern South America	
Main Goal(s): Ensure protection of persons of concern in Northern South America in accordance with international refugee law and human rights standards	
Objectives	Outputs
Apply a community development approach to ensure that persons of concern have access to protection and assistance, especially in border areas.	<p>Access to protection is increased by enhancing the monitoring capacity of UNHCR and associated players.</p> <p>Special protection needs of persons of concern in border areas are identified, defined and addressed.</p> <p>Host communities are supported through an integrated programme implemented in co-operation with public authorities and other stakeholders.</p> <p>Refugees and asylum seekers move towards self-sufficiency.</p> <p>Persons of concern are aware and empowered to pursue their rights and gain access to protection and assistance.</p> <p>Gender/age needs are identified and addressed in community development strategies.</p>
Ensure that legal and institutional frameworks respond to protection needs of persons of UNHCR concern.	<p>Asylum seekers are registered, have access to fair RSD procedures and are provided with documents.</p> <p>Alternative protection frameworks are identified, adapted and promoted.</p> <p>Asylum seekers and refugees enjoy basic civil rights, and their economic and social rights are promoted.</p> <p>Regional and national authorities facilitate local integration through public policies.</p> <p>Authorities and other decision makers are aware of the plight of persons of concern and respond</p>

	accordingly.
<p>Strengthen partnerships to enhance protection and attention to people of UNHCR concern.</p>	<p>Government's institutional capacity to respond to refugees is reinforced.</p> <p>UNHCR's IPs operational frameworks are enhanced to focus on self-reliance of refugees.</p> <p>A UN plan of action is coordinated and implemented to support refugees and host communities. Strategic alliances are built and broadened through additional NGOs that take part to support UNHCR's Mandate and operations.</p> <p>Partners are well-informed and sensitized about UNHCR, its Mandate and public policies, and programmes of NGOs and activities.</p> <p>Gender/age needs of refugees are also addressed by specialized organizations.</p>