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**Overview of UNHCR's operations in the Americas****A. Situational context***Colombia situation*

In 2015 and early 2016, the Colombian Government continued to engage in peace talks with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to end the 50-year armed conflict that has generated over 6.5 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) and 350,000 refugees. Negotiations progressed and are expected to conclude with a peace agreement by mid-2016. At the joint request of the Colombian Government and the FARC, the United Nations will establish a 12-month renewable political mission to monitor the ceasefire and cessation of hostilities. The Colombian people will be asked to endorse the peace agreement in a national referendum.

The peace agreement will mark the beginning of a peacebuilding process, which will incorporate measures to reduce the risk of relapse into conflict. A key aspect of the process will be finding comprehensive durable solutions for displaced populations. In this context, UNHCR, as part of a broader United Nations response, will support the Government's rapid response plan to consolidate peace in the 18 months after the signature of the peace agreement. UNHCR will also maintain its presence in affected areas where displacement may continue.

In Ecuador, the Government estimates that, among the thousands of Colombians who arrived in the country in 2015, approximately 550 approached the asylum institution each month to seek international protection. Some arrivals opted to apply for a two-year MERCOSUR<sup>1</sup> residence visa. In April 2016, the first batch of these visas issued to earlier arrivals is due to expire but may be replaced by permanent resident visas. The Ecuadorian Government and UNHCR are strengthening cooperation to provide assistance and solutions to persons concerned.

In August 2015, the Venezuelan Government declared a state of emergency in several municipalities of its north-eastern states and gradually closed its 2,200 kilometre border with Colombia, as illegal armed groups involved in smuggling posed a security threat in these areas. The border has remained closed, and UNHCR's solutions strategy has since focused on facilitating the acquisition of documentation by persons of concern in Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) in order to allow them to exercise their rights and access services.

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<sup>1</sup> MERCOSUR – Mercado Común del Sur (Southern Common Market) includes Argentina, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay, as well as two associate States (Chile and Peru).

### *Central America*

In 2015, the severity and scale of violence in El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, also known as the Northern Triangle of Central America, reached high levels. The increased zones of control of criminal organizations and other illegal armed groups triggered the flight of hundreds of thousands of individuals to the neighbouring countries, mainly Mexico. Among those fleeing, some also moved onwards to the United States of America. When compared to the same period of the previous year, the number of children and families apprehended while crossing the United States border almost tripled between October and December 2015, reaching nearly 40,000. Globally, the number of asylum applications filed by individuals from the Northern Triangle of Central America stood at over 55,000 in mid-2015, more than quadrupling since 2010.

In October 2015, UNHCR published the study “Women on the run,”<sup>2</sup> which illustrates how criminal armed groups terrorize populations to establish control over large areas of the Northern Triangle of Central America and inflict extreme forms of sexual and gender-based violence against women in particular. In 2015, out of more than 160 women interviewed by United States authorities, 82 per cent were found to have a credible fear of persecution or torture. In this regard, the study urged the international community to address the looming refugee crisis.

Faced with formidable humanitarian challenges, governments in the region expressed their firm commitment to address the root causes of violence and enhance protection mechanisms. For instance, in Guatemala, a border monitoring and protection network, as well as a United Nations Task Force on Children and Migration, was set up, and reception facilities in four shelters for deportees were improved. In El Salvador and Honduras, protection networks were enhanced, and protection-sensitive reception protocols and guidelines were developed. The capacities of personnel in reception centres were also strengthened.

A profiling exercise of IDPs conducted by the Honduran Government, in cooperation with UNHCR and the Joint IDP Profiling Service, compiled information on more than 41,000 displaced households (i.e. 174,000 individuals) in 20 municipalities affected by violence. UNHCR stands ready to support the Salvadoran Government in a similar exercise to help design and implement an adequate institutional response.

### *The Caribbean*

Eight Caribbean countries and territories – Aruba, the Bahamas, Belize, the Cayman Islands, Jamaica, Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, and the Turks and Caicos Islands – took important steps towards developing regional migration consultations. In January 2016, the Government of Belize, in collaboration with UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration, hosted a preparatory meeting during which key themes were identified with a view to developing a “Caribbean Regional Consultative Process.” This new regional forum aims to design comprehensive policies for vulnerable people on the move, using a rights-based framework and establishing protection-sensitive entry mechanisms and differentiated procedures for those in need of international protection.

### *The Southern Cone*

Under the framework of the MERCOSUR regional migratory policy, an independent study on migratory alternatives for refugees was finalized and shared with governments and other stakeholders. While the study established that the current MERCOSUR migratory system facilitates the mobility of refugees and enables them to find durable solutions, it

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<sup>2</sup> Available from <http://www.unhcr.org/5630f24c6.html>.

recommended that MERCOSUR countries consider incorporating specific protection safeguards into their policies. More broadly, progress was achieved in strengthening cross-border monitoring mechanisms in Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Brazil and Peru.

Many States and municipalities across the subregion increased budgetary allocations for refugee integration, despite the economic slowdown. Nevertheless, full integration, particularly through formal employment and permanent housing, remained challenging. One of UNHCR's priorities in the Southern Cone will be to further promote local integration, including through livelihood opportunities and work with the private sector to complement the efforts of central and municipal authorities.

## **B. Achieving the global strategic priorities**

### *Access to asylum*

The Quality Assurance Initiative, which has been implemented in Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Mexico and Panama, has sought to enhance national asylum systems, including by ensuring there are appropriate legal and procedural safeguards in refugee status determination procedures. As part of this initiative, Costa Rican immigration officials visited El Salvador and Colombia to familiarize themselves with the prevailing security situation affecting vulnerable groups. In Chile, the Quality Assurance Initiative was introduced, and the national refugee eligibility committee of Bolivia (Plurinational State of) adopted a resolution that signalled the country's intention to join the initiative. In Brazil, UNHCR continued to provide technical and operational support to the national refugee eligibility committee to help manage a backlog of asylum claims. As part of a joint effort with the Government of Ecuador, UNHCR is working closely with Refugee Directorate staff to support the refugee status determination procedure.

Several countries and territories in the Caribbean also took steps to establish functioning asylum systems in cooperation with UNHCR. For example, legislation on refugee protection was drafted in the Turks and Caicos Islands, and a refugee policy was drafted in Curaçao. In the Bahamas as well as Antigua and Barbuda, the respective ad hoc eligibility commissions processed the claims of Syrian asylum-seekers. By the end of 2015, the Belizean Government reactivated its refugee eligibility committee. In Trinidad and Tobago, the authorities established a Refugee Unit, and UNHCR is assisting the Government with the development of refugee legislation and the related system.

### *Comprehensive solutions*

The Americas region has continued to demonstrate solidarity and responsibility sharing in the context of the global refugee crisis. In 2015, Canada resettled close to 20,000 refugees through both government-assisted and private sponsorship programmes. This represents a 62 per cent increase when compared to 2014 and is the largest number of refugees to be resettled in Canada in any given year in the last 20 years.

During the forty-ninth MERCOSUR Summit in December 2015, a joint declaration, which was signed by the Presidents of Argentina, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), referred to the humanitarian situation in the Syrian Arab Republic and highlighted the importance of strengthening the implementation of policies related to pathways for admission of Syrian refugees and others affected by the conflict.

Brazil, for its part, extended the validity of humanitarian visas for persons affected by the Syria crisis for an additional period of two years. The country also signed a technical cooperation agreement with UNHCR to improve the identification process of persons with specific protection needs who may qualify for these visas. In 2015, Brazil granted permanent

residency on humanitarian grounds to some 44,000 Haitians residing in the country, many of whom were displaced by the 2010 earthquake. Argentina extended its humanitarian visa programme for Syrians for yet another year.

Regarding resettlement, UNHCR submitted the cases of over 1,300 Colombian refugees from Ecuador, and 850 were resettled in 2015. The final report of an independent evaluation on the Solidarity Resettlement Programme, which was carried out in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay and Uruguay, was shared with the governments concerned and will be presented at this year's Annual Tripartite Consultations on Resettlement. In addition to this, the review of experiences gained from an integration scheme ("*Vivir la integración*") in Costa Rica was undertaken with a view to replicating good practices in other operations.

In Colombia, the Transitional Solutions Initiative, which is set to end in 2016, has led to the development of UNHCR's new protection and solutions strategy. As the initiative begins to phase out, UNHCR is sharing lessons learned with the Colombian Government and plans to continue providing assistance in response to any new displacement, while supporting solutions.

In Ecuador, the Comprehensive Solutions Initiative has enabled UNHCR to mainstream its protection and solutions strategy, which complements national development plans. The protection and solutions strategy focuses on local integration and livelihoods, and includes innovative methods, such as the "graduation approach"<sup>3</sup> and the local integration index.<sup>4</sup>

### *Eradication of statelessness*

In Peru, Legislative Decree No. 1236-2015, which was adopted in October 2015, established safeguards to protect stateless migrants. In Chile, the Civil Registry Office began re-registering over 160 persons as Chilean nationals. They are among some 2,800 persons who were born to foreigners in transit and require confirmation of their nationality. In Colombia, steps were taken to eradicate statelessness when the Government issued Circular 059, which establishes that all children born to foreigners, including those holding certain types of temporary resident permits, should be registered and, in doing so, obtain proof of Colombian nationality.

*Chiriticós*, a project undertaken in Costa Rica, produced significant results. The project aims to identify indigenous children and youth of Ngöbe-Buglés origin<sup>5</sup> who were born in Costa Rica to Panamanian parents but whose births have not been registered in Costa Rica or Panama and whose nationality has therefore not been confirmed. The project assisted them with late birth registration and documentation procedures, in cooperation with the Registrar's Office of the Supreme Electoral Tribunal and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). Since the beginning of the project, the nationality of nearly 1,400 Ngöbe-Buglés individuals was confirmed.

In the Dominican Republic, the authorities have indicated their commitment to finding solutions for those born in the country but whose nationality remains uncertain. They approved a 12-month extension of the memorandum of understanding through which

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<sup>3</sup> Pioneered by the NGO BRAC and piloted by the World Bank's Consultative Group to Assist the Poor (CGAP) and the Ford Foundation, the graduation approach enables refugee and local families to progressively overcome extreme poverty and access sustainable livelihood opportunities.

<sup>4</sup> The local integration index is a statistical methodology developed by UNHCR that aims to measure four parameters – legal, economic, social and cultural – to determine the integration level of persons of concern in relation to the local population.

<sup>5</sup> Indigenous Ngöbe Bugle people crossed from Panama into Costa Rica as part of their traditional way of life in what they regarded as ancestral territory and later settled in remote coffee plantations in Costa Rica and never registered the birth of their children. According to the Costa Rican Constitution, children born to foreign parents in Costa Rica acquire Costa Rican nationality upon registration of their birth.

UNHCR is providing technical support. UNHCR's revised estimate of the number of stateless persons in Dominican Republic now stands at 133,700.

In the context of the #ibelong campaign to end statelessness within 10 years, the Secretary General of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) signed UNHCR's open letter and promoted universal accession to the 1954 and 1961 statelessness conventions in the Americas.

#### *Child protection*

In Mexico, a law on the human rights of children, which includes a chapter on refugee and migrant children, came into effect in December 2014 and was followed by the adoption of implementing regulations in December 2015. These developments open the way for alternatives to detention of child asylum-seekers and for the establishment of a procedure to determine the best interests of the child. In Central America and Mexico, the "Children of Peace project" funded by the European Commission Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection department (ECHO) promoted and enhanced the protection of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex youth.

### **C. Financial information**

The 2016 comprehensive needs assessment budget for the Americas approved by the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme in October 2015 was US\$ 115.6 million. By January 2016, this budget had increased by US\$ 5.3 million for a total of US\$ 120.9 million. The Office allocated US\$ 1.5 million of the original budget to the implementation of the Brazil Plan of Action, with a particular focus on supporting activities in the Southern Cone as well as in Costa Rica, Mexico and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), and reinforcing the capacity of the Americas Bureau at Headquarters.

Out of the US\$ 5.3 million budgetary increase, US\$ 4.9 million was approved for the expansion of the protection and solutions strategy in the Northern Triangle of Central America and neighbouring countries to strengthen protection response in the subregion. Additional resources will be necessary to find solutions for stateless persons in the Dominican Republic and Haiti.