

## **Update on UNHCR operations in the Americas region**

### **A. Situational analysis, including new developments**

#### *General overview*

The Americas region hosts about 20 million refugees, asylum-seekers, internally displaced persons and stateless people, as well as returnees with protection needs. Forced displacement in the region may rise in 2023, as the root causes remain unaddressed and aggravated by the global financial crisis and climate events.

A new record was set in 2022 for the number of people in mixed movements, almost doubled the total number registered in 2021 (approximately 130,000). Some 250,000 individuals entered Panama in 2022 through the Darién Gap, with Venezuelans accounting for 61 per cent, followed by nationals from Cuba, Ecuador and Haiti. January 2023 saw the highest number of new entries through the Darién Gap with nearly 25,000 individuals, mainly Ecuadorians and Haitians. Some 2 million people crossed the southwest border of the United States of America, including nationals from Mexico, Cuba, Nicaragua and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), a 26 per cent increase compared to 2021.

Regional human mobility dynamics shifted following, among other factors, two policy changes by the United States Government related to arrivals at its southern border including expanding the Title 42 expulsion and parole entry programmes for Venezuelans to include Cubans, Haitians, and Nicaraguans. In October 2022, the Government announced a new migration process for Venezuelans, which led to a decrease in the number of Venezuelans attempting to move north through the Darién Gap. More than 10,000 Venezuelans applied for asylum in transit countries while some returned to Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of). In January 2023, the extension of the parole entry programmes to the United States to include the other three nationalities brought the new total cap to 30,000 entrants through parole entry programmes per month.

Significant humanitarian and protection needs were reported along the routes in Central America and Mexico, particularly at key border and other reception locations. Additional efforts were required to strengthen capacity in shelter; food; healthcare; psychosocial support; information provision and legal counselling; and other protection services. Assisting governments in the prevention of forced displacement and the implementation of protection responses remains critical for UNHCR. This will include providing reliable information on human mobility; ensuring access to territory; providing safe and dignified reception; and implementing fair and efficient asylum procedures and other protection-oriented legal stay arrangements. Efforts to identify collaborative and workable solutions such as the ones offered to Venezuelan refugees and migrants will redouble.

To promote comprehensive and coordinated regional responses, UNHCR engages with governments and other stakeholders, including civil society, the private sector, and financial institutions, in the implementation of the Los Angeles Declaration on Migration and Protection. The declaration aims to bolster pledges that enhance protection-sensitive entry systems; ensure access to asylum and other protection-oriented arrangements; stabilize populations in communities of destination, origin, and return; and expand pathways for regular migration and international protection.

### *Venezuela situation*

Cross-border displacement remains a concern in Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of). There are over 7.1 million Venezuelan refugees and migrants, of which 84 per cent are hosted in Latin America and the Caribbean. Over 211,000 have been recognized as refugees, and more than a million are asylum-seekers worldwide.

Countries in the Americas region, including Brazil, Colombia, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru and Uruguay, have granted asylum and implemented legal stay arrangements facilitating access to documentation and basic socioeconomic rights. In Brazil, some 49,000 Venezuelans have been recognized as refugees and 338,000 have obtained residency permits. In Colombia, about 2 million Venezuelans have been biometrically registered, with almost 1.5 million already in possession of a temporary protection permit. In Ecuador, four months into the latest regularization exercise, 140,000 people have been biometrically registered, 100,000 have received a certificate of temporary stay, 39,000 exception temporary residence visas have been issued and 26,000 people have received an Ecuadorian identity card.

As spontaneous return movements to Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) have increased, local authorities and communities receiving returnees, need assistance in terms of shelter, water and sanitation, protection services (such as legal aid and personal documentation), relief items, health, education, socioeconomic reintegration and infrastructure.

The inter-agency coordination platform for refugees and migrants from Venezuela (known as R4V in Spanish) launched its refugee and migrant response plan for 2023-2024. This new multi-year plan brings together 228 partners that implement humanitarian, protection, and socioeconomic integration activities to assist 3.4 million refugees and migrants and affected host communities in 2023 alone. UNHCR, along with United Nations agencies, also supports the implementation of the humanitarian response plan to assist those in need inside Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of).

An international conference in solidarity with Venezuelan refugees and migrants and their host countries and communities will be co-organized by the European Union and Canada, in collaboration with UNHCR, the International Office of Migration (IOM) and R4V, to take place in Belgium in March 2023. Chile assumed the Pro tempore Presidency of the Quito Process and has already begun organizing activities regarding assistance to host communities, the role of local governments, family reunification and refugee protection.

### *Colombia situation*

The new Colombian Government gives priority to the ‘total peace’ approach, involving formal dialogues with over 30 armed groups, including the National Liberation Army (ELN). The Government has adopted a four-year development plan and efforts to advance in the promotion of a comprehensive programme of social reforms are ongoing.

Despite these efforts, confrontations among irregular armed groups have led to increased external and internal displacement disproportionately affecting the indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities. In 2022, over 185,000 new internally displaced persons were reported by official figures and over 4,000 Colombian asylum-seekers were registered in Ecuador. The ongoing peace dialogue and the implementation of the 2016 peace agreement open new opportunities for more solutions to displacement.

### *Central America and Mexico*

More than one million people have been uprooted in Central America due to violence, human rights violations, poverty and climate events. In October, tropical storms had a devastating impact in parts of Central America, affecting displaced people and causing transit centers to exceed capacity.

The number of asylum-seekers and refugees from El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras has reached over 636,000. Costa Rica and Mexico remain among the main asylum countries with 130,000 and 119,000 new claims registered respectively, in 2022. Mexico has recorded a significant increase of Cuban, Nicaraguan and Venezuelan asylum-seekers as well. Capacity

building efforts by UNHCR are critical to reinforce overwhelmed asylum systems and respond to backlogs.

Internal displacement continues in most countries in Central America, as well as in Mexico. UNHCR scaled up prevention efforts by identifying drivers of displacement and working with communities of origin and those hosting internally displaced persons. UNHCR also reinforced efforts to work with the United Nations system and governments in developing legal frameworks and public policies to respond to the needs of displaced populations. To enhance prevention and collaborative responses, UNHCR has strengthened its advocacy and leading role in the protection clusters, coordinating with key stakeholders including central and local governments, international organizations, civil society, community organizations and displaced populations. The recent adoption of the law on internal displacement in Honduras, UNHCR assistance to communities and national institutions in El Salvador through 11 youth-run centres and the progress in the development of information management and protection responses in Mexico are examples of joint efforts to provide responses.

The regional comprehensive protection and solutions framework (known in Spanish as Marco Integral Regional para la Protección y Soluciones, or MIRPS) held its fifth annual meeting in Honduras in December 2022, marking the handover of the Pro tempore Presidency from Honduras to Panama. MIRPS States adopted the Tegucigalpa Declaration, committing to reinforcing national and local institutions and fostering dialogue and actions for shared responsibility and regional solidarity. As Chair of the MIRPS support platform, the United States of America developed a strategy with a focus on integration initiatives. In 2022, the Central American Bank for Economic Integration and the World Bank became members of the support platform, joining the Inter-American Development Bank in identifying longer-term solutions in Central America and Mexico.

#### *Nicaragua situation*

By mid-2022, over 267,000 Nicaraguans had been forced to flee, with almost 89 per cent seeking protection in Central America, mainly in Costa Rica. In the first half of 2022, the number of Nicaraguan asylum-seekers increased globally from 164,000 to 224,000, and the number of Nicaraguan refugees increased from 11,000 to 12,000. Some 138,000 Nicaraguans entered Honduras in a regular manner in 2022, and the majority continued their journey northbound.

Costa Rica is implementing a special temporary stay arrangement on humanitarian grounds for individuals from Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), whose asylum cases have been rejected or are pending resolution. UNHCR provides technical guidance to the Costa Rican authorities in addressing the backlog, including through the provision of funding and staff. In December 2022, the Global Concessional Financing Facility, created by the World Bank, together with the United Nations and the Islamic Development Bank, named Costa Rica as eligible for its funding to aid development projects benefiting refugees, asylum-seekers and host communities. Increased support from the international community is needed to expand access to asylum and temporary protection stay arrangements for Nicaraguans, to ensure access to basic services and assistance, and to facilitate their integration.

#### *Caribbean*

UNHCR provides technical guidance in the Caribbean for the prevention of refoulement, building asylum systems, and inclusion of forcibly displaced and stateless people into existing national systems. Enhanced collaboration with sub-regional entities such as the Caribbean Community, remains a key priority, including on the impact of climate change and emergency preparedness.

In Haiti, violence, including sexual violence, kidnapping, looting and roadblocks by armed gangs, as well as a recent outbreak of cholera have exacerbated an already dire humanitarian situation, marked by acute food insecurity, fuel shortages and limited health care and sanitation. States in the region and beyond have been called to suspend the forced return of Haitians to their country and to provide access to fair and efficient asylum procedures for people seeking international protection. UNHCR supports inter-agency response efforts within Haiti and also focuses its response in Central America and Mexico on advocacy

interventions and assistance for Haitians, many of whom are coming from other countries where they initially sought safety. Additional and sustainable resources, as well as predictable humanitarian access, are required to provide protection to the thousands of people uprooted by violence inside Haiti.

## **B. Progress and challenges by impact area in 2022 and updated plans for 2023**

### **(i) Attaining favourable protection environments**

UNHCR works with States in the region to strengthen asylum systems, including improving access to asylum and protection-sensitive entry systems to manage mixed movements. This includes the provision of technical guidance and assistance, as well as support for enhanced registration procedures, processing and adjudication of asylum claims, implementation of differentiated refugee status determination procedures and providing country of origin information. In addition, UNHCR also assisted States to complement asylum with the expansion of regularization programmes and protection-oriented legal stay arrangements with appropriate safeguards for persons in need of international protection, ensuring faster access to protection and services. Regularization processes for Venezuelans remain ongoing in Colombia and Ecuador, and Brazil extended its humanitarian visas and temporary policy for Haitians until the end of March 2023. In Belize, the government initiated an amnesty programme for undocumented foreigners, including asylum-seekers and rejected asylum-seekers, as part of its commitments under the Los Angeles Declaration. A new immigration law was adopted in Paraguay, which includes the concept of asylum, the principles of non-refoulement and family unity, child protection and documentation. UNHCR contributed to a draft law in Chile that, if adopted, would improve refugee protection provisions contained in law N°20.430.

#### *Pursuing protection and solutions for internally displaced persons*

While redoubling efforts to help internally displaced persons, UNHCR prioritized the strengthening of national responses, advocacy for the adoption of legal frameworks to address root causes, and partnerships to collect and analyse reliable data to better understand and resolve the drivers of displacement. The Governments of Honduras and El Salvador launched a new data collection exercise to update information on the numbers, demographics and socioeconomic profiles of displaced persons. UNHCR worked with governments to ensure internally displaced persons enjoy access to public services (health and education) and humanitarian assistance, and reinforced access to legal and psychosocial services, emergency shelter, livelihoods opportunities, and cash assistance programmes.

UNHCR coordinates closely with development actors, donors, and other partners and assisted the Resident Coordinators and the United Nations country teams to deliver on the United Nations Secretary-General's Action Agenda on Internal Displacement. Colombia was chosen as a pilot country for programmes within the workstream on delivering solutions. UNHCR and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration signed a collaboration agreement in October 2022, for joint engagement in high-impact social programmes and projects for high-risk communities in Honduras and other countries across the sub-region. In El Salvador, UNHCR has engaged stakeholders in discussions on solutions, in light of the changes in the drivers and patterns of displacement in 2022.

### **(ii) Realizing rights in safe environments**

#### *Facilitating access to education*

UNHCR provides guidance to national education systems with the aim to increase inclusion of displaced children across the region. In Chile, a call for teacher training was launched through the "Creando Aula" programme, managed by the regional education group. In Mexico, over 1,700 children benefited in 2022 under the auspices of the Educate a Child programme. In Colombia, arrangements were made for implementing the Albert Einstein German Academic Refugee Initiative (known as DAFI) scholarship programme.

**(iii) Empowering communities and achieve gender equality**

UNHCR participated in the fifteenth regional conference on women in Argentina, chaired by the Governments of Chile and Argentina. UNHCR advocated the consideration of forced displacement and international protection in States' policies and responses, including approaches that recognize and respond to displaced women and girls as the most impacted by the disruptions in social networks, burdens of care, and poor and risky labour conditions. In December, UNHCR published a regional gender-based violence assessment.

In Brazil, the National Council for the Rights of Children and Adolescents published a new resolution, updating procedures for unaccompanied, separated and undocumented children.

**(iv) Securing solutions**

The MIRPS, the Quito Process and the Cities of Solidarity initiative complement the regional operationalization of the Global Compact on Refugees. During the twenty-seventh Mercociudades Summit, held in Uruguay, UNHCR and Mercociudades signed a strategic agreement to promote the Cities of Solidarity initiative.

The High Commissioner's Dialogue on Protection Challenges in December 2022 focused on development cooperation and highlighted existing regional coordination mechanisms and frameworks to enhance engagement by development actors in displacement settings. Representatives from governments, the private sector and civil society in Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras and Mexico showcased their experience with good practices.

Two memoranda of understanding were signed with the Inter-American Development Bank and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration, respectively, and UNHCR has stepped up engagement with the World Bank in supporting additional countries in the region for the global concessional financing facility.

*Promoting socio-economic inclusion*

As part of the implementation of a durable solutions strategy, local integration remains the main focus in the region. Financial inclusion of refugees and asylum-seekers through access to bank accounts has been promoted in Costa Rica and Guatemala. In Ecuador, in the context of the United Nations Global Compact, UNHCR and *Sin Fronteras* launched the "inclusive company seal" to recognize companies that employ refugees; to date, 62 companies have received the seal. In Costa Rica, 30 companies received the "living the integration" award to recognize their inclusion efforts. In Chile, the inclusive market initiative is supporting the commercialization of products and services offered by refugees and migrants, and 330,00 refugees and asylum-seekers have benefitted from government social protection programmes within this initiative. In countries with more fragile formal labour markets and high rates of informal employment, UNHCR supports skill training and entrepreneurship initiatives and enhance private sector partnerships to facilitate market inclusion of asylum seekers, refugees as well as internally displaced persons and persons at-risk of displacement. UNHCR also supported income generation activities of refugee-led organizations, as part of its localization efforts.

By end-2022, over 28,500 refugees were relocated to eleven destinations within Mexico through the local integration programme. Refugees are contributing some \$8 million in tax revenue to the Mexican economy. In Brazil, more than 95,000 Venezuelans were relocated and integrated in over 850 municipalities as part of the Government's relocation strategy implemented by *Operação Acolhida*.

*Resettlement and complementary pathways for admission to third countries*

Resettlement opportunities were expanded, through increased identification and processing capacities, and 9,400 individuals were submitted by the end of 2022, representing a 20 per cent increase compared to 2021. Complementary pathways remain a strategic priority. Following Canada's announcement to extend its labour mobility programme for Venezuelan refugees, UNHCR is enhancing the identification and referral of candidates from Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, and Peru.

*Family reunification*

In the first quarter of 2023, UNHCR will continue supporting the United States to expand admission for Central Americans based on family reunification through identification, counselling, and support to potential beneficiaries. UNHCR enhances family reunification opportunities for refugees and migrants with participating States of the Quito Process. UNHCR facilitated family reunifications of Venezuelan nationals in Argentina and Uruguay.

*Eradicating statelessness*

UNHCR is reinforcing regional efforts for the eradication and prevention of statelessness. In the Dominican Republic, the first 37 beneficiaries of law 169-14 were provided with Dominican identity documents. In Haiti, the UNHCR partner initiative *Citoyenne pour les Droits de l'Homme* conducted statelessness prevention activities, resulting in 567 people obtaining birth certificates. In collaboration with UNHCR, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights published a practical guide to improve international protection and the regularization of legal status in the context of large-scale mixed migration movements in the Americas, which includes good practices and recommendations for the prevention of childhood statelessness.

**C. Financial information**

In October 2022, the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme approved a budget of \$827.2 million for the Americas for 2023. The main impact areas are: attaining favourable protection environments (\$270.4 million), realizing basic rights in safe environments (\$267.3 million), securing solutions (\$203.3 million), and empowering communities and achieving gender equality (\$86.2 million). As of 7 February 2023, operational needs for the Americas have been 3 per cent funded, with \$600,000 including the of indicative allocation of flexible funding.

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