

Mexico and Central America

Mexico
Belize
Costa Rica
El Salvador
Guatemala
Honduras
Nicaragua

Recent Developments

The integration programme for Guatemalan refugees in Mexico will be completed by the end of 2001. Since August 1996, some 5,100 Guatemalan refugees in the states of Campeche, Quintana Roo and Chiapas have become Mexican nationals through the Migratory Stabilisation Programme, which has included a fast-track naturalisation procedure. Some 12,000 are Mexicans by birth, though most are minors, and another 5,000, mainly in the State of Chiapas, have permanent residence and may opt for Mexican nationality. The final phase of the project implemented in Chiapas will focus on completing the remaining infrastructure works, consolidating the microcredit programme and ensuring individual documentation for both men and women refugees.

In Costa Rica, there has been a significant increase in Colombians seeking asylum in 2001. Third quarter arrivals this year, estimated to be over 3,900, are higher than the first two quarters combined. To assist the Government with eligibility determination for the growing backlog of claimants, in late June UNHCR set up a Refugee Status Determination project in co-operation with the Government. This project has reduced the processing time by half, trained additional government staff and established a computerised registration system.

The region has seen a steady growth in migrants, with proportionately smaller numbers of asylum-seekers among them. Tens of thousands of undocumented Central and South Americans, as well as extra-continental migrants from Africa, Asia, the Middle East, and other locations, are now arriving in Central America and Mexico.

It is reported that border controls have become stricter following the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001. This development will require additional efforts by UNHCR in co-operation with governments in the region to ensure compliance with refugee law.

Strategic Objectives

UNHCR's strategy in the region is four-pronged: strengthening and/or developing asylum systems in each country; finding durable solutions for refugees; reinforcing relatively new protection networks; and raising public awareness and support to UNHCR. Activities are designed to ensure equal access and opportunities for both women and men seeking protection in the region.

Working closely with government counterparts in Mexico, Belize and Central America, the Office will provide legal



and technical advice for the adoption or modification of implementing legislation in accordance with international norms and practice. Similarly, UNHCR will work with the Government in each country to establish or strengthen asylum systems, including national refugee status determination procedures. It will also advocate for measures that ensure that countries comply with their international obligations towards refugees when applying new or additional migratory measures or laws. UNHCR will also continue its active participation as an observer in the Regional Conference for Migration, also known as the Puebla Process, encouraging the Governments concerned to provide asylum seekers with access to asylum procedures.

UNHCR will continue its efforts to find durable solutions for refugees in the region. Particularly in the case of long-staying Central American refugees, funding shortfalls negatively affected the number of naturalisations initially envisaged for 2001. Nevertheless, UNHCR will continue in 2002 to advocate for naturalisation as a durable solution for refugees with long periods of residency in Central American countries.

In order to devolve a greater degree of responsibility to local institutions, UNHCR will continue to strengthen refugee pro-

tection networks involving Government and/or State institutions as well as NGO partners. These networks will continue to assist in monitoring access to asylum for those requiring it, advocate for access and effective State protection mechanisms, and provide initial assistance to vulnerable asylum-seekers and newly recognised refugees. Local NGO partners will be encouraged and supported by UNHCR to improve their capacity and funding base in order to assure better self-sustainability.

Public information activities will continue to raise awareness about refugee situations, targeting the media in particular. By sensitising the media and other interest groups to important issues affecting the protection of refugees, such as legislation and the role of eligibility committees, UNHCR will be supporting its protection objectives.

Operations

With the exception of Costa Rica, beneficiary population numbers have fallen in the region as a result of the completion of voluntary repatriation and local integration programmes. Throughout Mexico and Central America, it is estimated that there will be some 26,000 refugees and 9,000 asylum-seekers at the beginning of 2002. Approximately 22,000 refugees are

long-staying Central Americans for whom UNHCR will no longer be providing material assistance. The most viable durable solution for many of these refugees will be naturalisation. UNHCR's role will be primarily to facilitate this process, ensuring that both refugee men and women have equal access and receive individual identity documents.

The population which will benefit from UNHCR's direct assistance in 2002 will consist of newly arriving refugees, primarily from Colombia, and also from African, Asian and the Middle Eastern countries among others. Refugees from outside Latin America often do not speak Spanish and have different cultural practices from the national populations. As a result, integration poses more of a challenge and requires different types of assistance, including language classes, over longer periods of time. Asylum-seekers will receive legal counselling, and vulnerable beneficiaries will be provided with food and housing for a maximum of six months.

In Mexico, the remaining Guatemalan refugees in the southern state of Chiapas will continue to benefit from the fast track naturalisation procedure. According to estimates, some 5,000 qualifying Guatemalans may become Mexican citizens by the end of 2003. Difficulties in the renewal of residence permits and the registration of newly born children in Chiapas will be addressed in order to facilitate their local integration. Discussions are

under way on the idea of applying a similar naturalisation procedure to long-staying refugees in urban areas.

Throughout the last half of 2001, UNHCR and the Government have been discussing the gradual transfer of the refugee determination process to Mexican authorities. In 2002, when the national refugee status determination procedure will be implemented, UNHCR plans to provide eligibility training to designated government counterparts. The increasing level of migration in Mexico and the Central American region receives far greater attention and resources than refugee matters. In this context, UNHCR will actively monitor access to asylum, directly and through the refugee protection network. UNHCR will also work to strengthen the advocacy and assistance capabilities of organisations participating in the protection network. Furthermore, as in previous years, UNHCR and the National Institute for Migration will continue the training program on refugee law for migration officials in different parts of the country.

In Guatemala, Belize, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, UNHCR will continue to deploy efforts to ensure that Governments assume their responsibilities as Parties to the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol. The Honduras and Nicaragua Governments have ad hoc procedures for the determination of refugee status and are considering implementing



Mexico: Guatemalan refugees. Margaritas municipality. UNHCR/R. Ramirez.

legislation. In Guatemala, draft legislation officially received decree status, entering into force on 3 October 2001. Discussions will continue with the Guatemalan Government to find durable solutions for some 720 long-staying refugees, mainly from other Central American countries. In El Salvador, it is expected that legislation will be enacted by the beginning of the year. In Belize, UNHCR will continue to encourage the Government to re-establish its eligibility committee, which has not functioned since 1998.

Training and partnerships are integral to achieving UNHCR's goals in Central America. UNHCR will continue to deliver practical training on refugee law to government officials who deal with migration and refugee issues in each country, and will endeavour to find a balance between migration policies and measures and the protection of asylum-seekers and refugees. The strengthening of linkages between national protection networks will hopefully lead to better asylum monitoring, advocacy and assistance.

Obtaining support from an informed public is also critical for developing effective protection in the region. To achieve this objective, UNHCR aims to increase an understanding of refugee issues both locally and internationally, clarify the difference between migrants and refugees and build a culture of understanding and solidarity towards refugees. These goals will be reached through a variety of public awareness activities including press releases, interviews, conferences, exhibitions and training events.

In **Costa Rica**, where refugee numbers continue to swell, UNHCR will build on the work of the special Refugee Status Determination team through continued support to the Government's Migration Department. While the Government establishes additional posts necessary within the Department, UNHCR will underwrite the costs of one additional eligibility officer. UNHCR will also continue its training programme for the gender-balanced eligibility team to encourage effective application of protection standards.

UNHCR's implementing partner will provide an average of three months' initial assistance to vulnerable asylum-seekers, including a subsistence allowance and registration in the national health scheme, while they await status determination decisions. It is estimated that between 20-25 per cent of newly arrived asylum-seekers will require this initial aid. Through agreements with Costa Rican institutions, refugees will receive counselling and legal support, particularly in cases of sexual violence. To further the involvement of civil society, UNHCR will work with the Office of the Ombudsman and other organisations working with migrants on asylum issues and encourage them to take a greater role in refugee assistance.

Through an agreement between UNHCR and the University of Costa Rica, a new programme of student internships will reinforce eligibility and assistance efforts. UNHCR and the

University will also undertake joint research to evaluate the level of integration of asylum-seekers and refugees. Based on the refined profile of asylum-seekers and refugees from this study, UNHCR foresees a restructuring of its programmes to address the needs of beneficiary populations in a more appropriate manner.

To reinforce UNHCR operations, the office in Costa Rica will continue to provide gender and protection support services throughout the Americas. Reinforcement of UNHCR's co-operation with the bodies of the Inter-American Human Rights system will continue in 2002 through collaboration in precedent-setting cases, exchange of legal opinions, and joint training. The Spanish-language website, established in 2001 and containing over 600 documents, will be upgraded and expanded. Particular emphasis will be placed on the development of a more cost-effective and sustainable protection training strategy. With guidance from the Senior Regional Gender Advisor, country teams will begin to implement selected recommendations endorsed in the consultations with refugee and IDP women in 2001, and to develop indicators to measure their impact.

BUDGET (USD)

Country	Annual Programme
Costa Rica	918,679
Mexico	1,795,353
Regional Activities ¹	1,874,200
Total	4,588,232

¹ Includes voluntary repatriation of refugees from Central America, Cuba, Mexico, legal assistance for new arrivals in Mexico and Central America, regional promotion and consolidation of durable solutions in Central America, Cuba, Mexico promotion of refugee law and scholarships for refugee students.