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**Update on UNHCR's operations in the Americas****A. Situational context including new developments***Venezuela situation*

The ongoing deterioration of the socioeconomic and human rights situation, as well as public order, in Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) has been compounded by a serious political and institutional crisis. More than 2.7 million Venezuelans have left the country since 2015, and this has had a significant impact on many countries in Latin America, the Caribbean and beyond.

Approximately 400,000 Venezuelans have filed asylum claims in countries around the world. Of these, more than half were submitted in 2018 alone. A further 1 million Venezuelans have benefitted from alternative forms of legal stay in Latin America. However, many individuals are in an irregular situation, making them particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse, extortion, trafficking, discrimination and xenophobia.

Most governments in the region have shown commendable solidarity towards refugees and migrants from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), providing them with access to territory, protection and assistance, including through new regularization processes and national response plans. UNHCR recognizes that the capacity of host countries has become overstretched, but an open admission policy needs to be maintained. The Office encourages host countries to refrain from introducing restrictive practices that could hamper access to rights, expose refugees and migrants to higher risks and escalate tensions at borders with local communities.

The 2018 Declaration of Quito on Human Mobility of Venezuelan Citizens in the Region<sup>1</sup> and its subsequent action plan<sup>2</sup> marked a significant achievement in harmonizing policies and practices across the countries of the region. It has led to a scaled-up and better coordinated humanitarian response, and improved access and enjoyment of rights.

In particular, the action plan acknowledged the need to strengthen international support, including through UN agencies, international financial institutions, regional organizations and regional migration forums. It also requested the Joint UNHCR-IOM Special Representative to assist in implementing the commitments made in the context of the "Quito process", in collaboration with States signatories to the declaration and UN agencies.

To ensure a system-wide response by the United Nations and complement the efforts of the main host countries in the region, the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform – co-led by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and UNHCR – was established in

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<sup>1</sup> The Declaration of Quito on Human Mobility of Venezuelan Citizens in the Region is available in Spanish from [www.cancilleria.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/declaracion\\_quito\\_reunion\\_tecnica\\_regional.pdf](http://www.cancilleria.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/declaracion_quito_reunion_tecnica_regional.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> The plan of action is available in Spanish from [www.cancilleria.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/plan\\_de\\_accion\\_de\\_quito.pdf](http://www.cancilleria.gob.ec/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/plan_de_accion_de_quito.pdf).

September 2018, and the Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RRMRP) was launched in December 2018.

The RRMRP is the first of its kind in the Americas. This multilateral humanitarian instrument offers a strategic and operational blueprint and a coordination and funding mechanism to respond to the most pressing needs of Venezuelans on the move. As part of the coordinated response, 95 partners are appealing for \$738.0 million in 2019 to assist 2.2 million refugees and migrants as well as half a million members of host communities in 16 countries.

The RRMRP has been designed to promote complementarity among the efforts of governments and other key stakeholders, such as development actors, and advocate the inclusion of refugees and migrants in existing policies and programmes. It is supported by four areas of intervention: (i) direct emergency assistance; (ii) protection; (iii) socioeconomic and cultural integration; and (iv) strengthened institutional capacity of the host governments. In addition, the Venezuela situation was included for the first time in the annual Global Humanitarian Overview for 2019.

In the framework of the RRMRP, UNHCR will continue to support States to improve reception conditions and encourage advocacy for legal stay arrangements that incorporate protection safeguards. Particular focus will be placed on the areas of registration; asylum or other legal pathways; documentation for returnees; profiling and protection monitoring; as well as access to basic services with specialized support for groups deemed particularly vulnerable.

UNHCR's presence in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Guyana, Peru, Trinidad and Tobago, Uruguay and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), as well as Aruba, will also be strengthened in order to help identify risks and respond to issues related to access to territory, sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV), human trafficking and child protection. To counter xenophobia and promote solidarity with people forced to flee, UNHCR, together with other UN and government partners, is carrying out a series of awareness campaigns throughout the region.

### *Colombia situation*

In addition to receiving significant numbers of refugees and migrants from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), Colombia continued to face considerable large-scale internal displacements in 2018, with some 100,000 persons newly displaced.

More than two years since the signing of the peace agreement, the pace of its implementation has been relatively slow, with delays owing to armed actors fighting for control in areas vacated by the demobilized Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). This, coupled with increased illicit crop production and limited results in the efforts to help farmers embrace alternative development, exposed many community leaders and human rights advocates to protection risks. Some became victims of attacks or were killed.

Against this background, UNHCR and partners will continue to support and assist internally displaced persons (IDPs) while scaling up the protection response for Venezuelan refugees and migrants. When compared to 2017, the number of Colombian nationals seeking asylum in Ecuador rose by 17 per cent, increasing from an average of 395 per month in 2017 to 464 per month in 2018. This was mainly due to human rights violations and violence at the hands of former FARC dissidents or criminal groups.

The emergence of new dynamics of violence and increased coca cultivation with associated illicit activities in border areas have also had an impact in Ecuador, resulting in a number of security incidents, internal displacement, as well as serious protection risks for refugees and host communities in Ecuador. In this context, UNHCR wishes to draw the attention of the international community to this situation with a view to mobilizing resources to respond to protection needs and foster solutions.

*North of Central America situation*

The north of Central America – El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras – saw high rates of violence and insecurity, making everyday life extremely dangerous in many communities. Economic activities were also rendered unsustainable due to violent crime and extortion. Invisible borders between rival gangs hindered access to schools, with constant risk of forced recruitment of children. Femicide and sexual violence – the highest rates in the Americas – have traumatized an entire generation of women and girls. Victims of such violence are often unable to seek justice, resulting in impunity and limited trust in the capacity of State institutions to protect them.

In 2018, the number of people fleeing the north of Central America increased by 30 per cent, with more than 311,000 asylum-seekers and refugees registered globally by year end. Over 64,000 new asylum-seekers from countries of the north of Central America were registered worldwide. Much of this displacement is little known to the general public, with people leaving quietly, often at the mercy of dangerous criminal networks.

A new phenomenon known as “caravans” of people, mainly from El Salvador and Honduras heading northwards to Mexico and the United States of America, caught the media’s attention in November 2018. By the end of December 2018, some 9,500 people had entered Mexico as part of these groups, 3,700 of whom sought asylum. In January 2019, new groups departed from El Salvador and Honduras, and approximately 14,000 individuals have registered in Mexico for “humanitarian visitor’s cards”, which grant residence for one year, freedom of movement and work authorization. In addition, Mexico announced the extension of its temporary worker programme and the issuance of humanitarian visitor’s cards at its embassies in Central America.

Since 2017, the six States that have been applying the comprehensive regional refugee response framework (known by its Spanish acronym “MIRPS”) have redoubled their efforts aiming to strengthen cooperation among countries of origin, transit and destination. They are also working to enhance protection safeguards and seek solutions to forced displacement, including by further engaging with development actors.

In addition, the MIRPS has helped mobilize financial institutions, such as the Inter-American Development Bank, and establish links with development initiatives, such as a UN Development Group for Latin America and the Caribbean’s initiative in Central America, and the comprehensive development plan for Central America of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean. UNHCR welcomes the leadership of States applying the MIRPS, remains committed to further supporting their efforts, together with other strategic partners such as the Organization of American States, and encourages States and donors to provide political and/or financial support.

*Nicaragua situation*

The situation in Nicaragua remains particularly tense and is expected to further deteriorate in 2019. Reports of arbitrary detentions, raids and human rights violations have continued, causing the flight of thousands of Nicaraguans. Costa Rica has received the largest number of the forcibly displaced, with more than 23,000 individuals filing asylum claims in 2018. An additional 9,000 have not yet had an opportunity to lodge such claims given a backlog but are expected to do so in early 2019. Mexico, Panama and other countries in the region are also seeing a considerable increase in asylum applications.

UNHCR’s regional response plan for the Nicaragua situation focused on strengthening asylum capacity in the receiving countries, mainly in Costa Rica and Panama. In Costa Rica, UNHCR continued to support admissions to the territory, enhance reception conditions and reduce processing times for asylum applications. The Office also helped reinforce the capacity of the national asylum system, including through additional case adjudicators as well as the provision of training and equipment.

With the establishment of a field office in Upala, Costa Rica in December 2018, UNHCR, together with partners, has been assisting with the identification and registration of cases

along the border and decentralizing case processing in support of the national asylum authority. Providing support to individuals in transit centres and cash-based assistance to those deemed particularly vulnerable continued to be an operational priority.

UNHCR's response plan also supports El Salvador and Honduras, which are primarily transit countries and where the Office works with partners to ensure that humanitarian assistance is readily available, and shelters are strengthened.

## **B. Regional strategic priorities**

### *Access to asylum*

In recent months, the growth in the number of asylum applications has continued unabated. Pending applications have surpassed the million mark across the Americas, and the authorities are facing significant challenges in ensuring timely protection responses using refugee status determination procedures. Against this background, UNHCR supports States in developing simplified and accelerated procedures to increase the efficiency of asylum systems receiving growing numbers of claims.

Countries in the region have developed ad hoc regularization processes or used existing national and regional alternative legal frameworks to provide documentation, legal stay and access to certain rights for increased numbers of people in need of international protection. The Office encourages the inclusion of protection safeguards in existing mechanisms, promotes a harmonized regional approach, and offers its technical expertise to prevent discrepancies that may result in onward movements due to varying protection standards at national level.

### *Sexual and gender-based violence*

Despite the concerted efforts of governments, UN agencies and other partners, SGBV, and exploitation and abuse continued to be a prominent feature of displacement trends in the Americas. Intimate partner violence, femicide, sexual abuse, child recruitment and family separation were of particular concern. Women and girls, as well as individuals targeted on the basis of their sexual orientation and gender identity, have been disproportionately affected.

High rates of forced displacement and human mobility across countries in the Americas also posed challenges for protection actors. To address the specific needs of the displaced, UNHCR promoted the coordination and standardization of service provision, prioritizing the provision of support in countries affected by the Venezuela situation or which have seen increased mixed migration. In addition, the Office provisionally released the guidelines on assessing and determining the best interests of the child in November 2018, which will be rolled out in 2019. Two specific projects on education and protection for children on the move were also implemented as part of the MIRPS in Guatemala and Mexico.

In the region, the Regional Safe Spaces Network continued to provide extensive support to survivors of SGVB, assisting displaced populations moving north from Central America. At the second annual workshop of the Regional Safe Spaces Network in December 2018, a "lessons learned and toolkit"<sup>3</sup> was launched to take stock of progress made so far and discuss activities, such as safe spaces, referral pathways and minimum standards. The Regional Safe Spaces Network also co-published, together with UNHCR, "The silence I carry: Disclosing gender-based violence in forced displacement", a report on ways to facilitate safe access of survivors to emergency protection services.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Available from [www.acnur.org/publications/pub\\_prot/5c05b97d4/the-regional-safe-spaces-network-in-the-americas-lessons-learned-and-toolkit.html](http://www.acnur.org/publications/pub_prot/5c05b97d4/the-regional-safe-spaces-network-in-the-americas-lessons-learned-and-toolkit.html).

<sup>4</sup> "The silence I carry: Disclosing gender-based violence in forced displacement" is available from [www.acnur.org/publications/pub\\_prot/5c081eae4/the-silence-i-carry-disclosing-gender-based-violence-in-forced-displacement.html](http://www.acnur.org/publications/pub_prot/5c081eae4/the-silence-i-carry-disclosing-gender-based-violence-in-forced-displacement.html).

Another positive development has also been the expansion of the membership of the Network. In addition to the existing members from Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Peru and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), organizations, including from Brazil, Ecuador and the United States of America, are taking steps to join the group.

#### *Comprehensive solutions*

The “cities of solidarity” concept recognizes the central role of cities in welcoming refugees, enabling them to enjoy social, economic and cultural rights, and facilitating their inclusion and integration in national systems. The concept of “cities of solidarity” has been applied in the region for the past 14 years and has yielded a wealth of good practices and lessons learned.

In 2019, a pilot will be carried out for cities to conduct self-assessments, participate in a certification programme and establish communities of practice. It will aim to enhance operational, multi-stakeholder responses in urban settings, including to advance integration and build an institutional response embraced by cities regardless of political leadership.

In the Southern Cone, good practices have helped foster the local integration of refugees. The Office will continue working with States and civil society partners to extend the rights of refugees, including in relation to the right to work, enable their access to health care and free education, and advocate for continued support for these policies despite increasing arrivals.

Now in its third year of implementation, the protection transfer arrangement is a life-saving mechanism and a unique model of multi-country responsibility-sharing. It provides individuals facing significant protection risks in the countries of the north of Central America with access to resettlement. The United States of America remained the largest receiving country in 2018, with Australia, Brazil and Uruguay agreeing to consider resettlement cases in 2019.

Since its inception, nearly 2,500 persons have been identified as being at heightened risk and were considered by the protection transfer arrangement. Of these, 900 cases were submitted for resettlement, and one third departed. The current goal is to exceed 1,000 resettlement submissions per year for El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras. With this in mind, a review of processing modalities is under way.

In 2018, nearly 25,000 refugees were resettled in the region, mainly in Canada and the United States of America, marking a recent historical low. This was attributable to a lowered resettlement ceiling in the United States of America, as well as increased security checks and fewer resettlement missions by the United States of America. Canada and the United States of America remain the top two resettlement countries. Argentina, Brazil, Chile and Uruguay’s resettlement and community-based sponsorship programmes continued to progress through a number of specific projects and with the support of the emerging resettlement country joint support mechanism and the Global Refugee Sponsorship Initiative, which was launched by Canada in 2016. UNHCR commends such efforts and encourages countries to increase the number of available spaces in order to provide durable solutions to growing numbers of refugees in need of resettlement.

#### *Eradication of statelessness*

The Americas continued to strive towards becoming the first continent to end statelessness. In September 2018, Haiti acceded to both statelessness conventions. Argentina is proposing legislation with a view to establishing a statelessness status determination procedure. Furthermore, in Uruguay, a bill was submitted to parliament to enhance protection of the rights of stateless persons and facilitate naturalization, and Paraguay established a statelessness determination procedure, protecting the rights of stateless people and providing a path for facilitated naturalization. The new law also helps ensure that the children of Paraguayan nationals born in a foreign country, who would otherwise be stateless, acquire nationality without having to settle in the country. Likewise, Panama approved the establishment of a statelessness status determination procedure through a decree in January

2019. In Colombia, a new draft bill on migration includes a chapter dedicated to the prevention of statelessness. In the Dominican Republic, UNHCR welcomed efforts undertaken by the Government, including to expedite the issuance of documentation for individuals who had applied under the law on special naturalization procedures and to evaluate the process of facilitating naturalization for individuals born in the country from two migrant parents. UNHCR stands ready to provide technical and operational support to the Government to find appropriate solutions, including for individuals who have not applied under this law.

### **C. Financial information**

In October 2018, the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme approved a budget of \$213.1 million for the Americas for 2019. By the end of January 2019, the total budget for the Americas amounted to \$328.1 million. This is due to an increase of \$71.4 million for the regional response to the Venezuela situation and a transfer from the "new and additional activities –mandate-related" reserve of \$43.6 million for the response to the influx in Mexico.

As of 31 January 2019, the needs of the Americas were 4 per cent funded after considering the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.

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