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## **Update on UNHCR's operations in the Americas**

### **A. Situational context including new developments**

#### *Venezuela Situation*

Refugees and migrants from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) continue to flee to Latin America and the Caribbean, with no indication that these movements will cease in the foreseeable future. It is estimated that the global number of Venezuelan refugees and migrants will increase from 5 million to 6.5 million by the end of 2020. Approximately 85 per cent will be located in the Americas region.

Since the onset of the crisis in 2015, countries in Latin America and the Caribbean have demonstrated continuous solidarity with, and generosity towards, Venezuelans. Many of these countries have maintained an open border policy and adjusted their legislation to meet the needs of refugees and migrants. By the end of 2019, governments in the region had granted more than 2 million residency permits to Venezuelans, and 770,000 had been registered as asylum-seekers or recognized as refugees. Currently, 13 countries accept expired Venezuelan passports, and additional procedures are underway to register and regularize the status of undocumented refugees and migrants from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of).

Nonetheless, these movements have impacted the region's demographic makeup and placed growing pressure on neighbouring States, especially Colombia. Countries hosting Venezuelans are contending with overstretched public services and budgets, social tensions arising from stigma against the Venezuelan population and pressure to revise existing entry requirements or establish new ones. Such measures have caused the number of irregular border crossings to increase and put an even greater number of people in danger. As a result, growing numbers of Venezuelans are forced to remain in irregular situations for reasons that include a lack of documentation, lengthy administrative procedures and restrictions, long waiting periods and expensive visa application fees. Venezuelans who are not able to regularize their status are vulnerable to various forms of exploitation, abuse, violence, discrimination, smuggling and trafficking, and are increasingly resorting to negative coping mechanisms.

At the regional level, the Quito Process remained the principal forum for harmonizing domestic policies and humanitarian responses to the Venezuelan crisis. The fifth round of the Quito Process took place in November 2019, in Bogotá. Its aims included reinforcing the coordination of the humanitarian response and improving effective access to rights for Venezuelan refugees and migrants. Among the main actions put forward in the final declaration of the Quito meeting<sup>1</sup> were the creation of a regional migration card and a database for information -sharing between governments, further harmonization of health measures, including a regional vaccination card, and the adoption of regional and national protocols for receiving and referring children at risk. Participating governments also agreed to work jointly with the Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform's Support Spaces

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<sup>1</sup> The joint declaration from the fifth round of the Quito process is available in Spanish from <https://www.cancilleria.gov.co/sites/default/files/quitov.pdf>.

Network to improve service mapping and service provision in reception and transit areas. Participating States made a formal request to UNHCR and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) for support in establishing the Quito Process technical secretariat and a “friends of the Quito Process” group of donor countries. The next meeting is planned to take place in May 2020, in Chile.

To mobilize support from the international community, a solidarity conference on Venezuelan refugees and migrants was held in Brussels in October 2019. The conference was co-hosted by the European Union, UNHCR and IOM. Participants affirmed the need for increased financial and technical support for host countries from donors as well as international financial institutions, development actors and the private sector, to provide more services and economic opportunities for refugees, migrants and host communities. To complement host country efforts aimed at integrating Venezuelans and scaling up the regional inter-agency response, it was agreed that a pledging conference should be organized, among other efforts, to sustain donor interest and raise additional funds throughout 2020. The Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform is working with the main host countries, cooperating States and development banks on this regional resource mobilization strategy.

The Regional Inter-Agency Coordination Platform, along with its national working groups on refugees and migrants, continued to work with national and local authorities to address humanitarian needs. The 2020 Regional Refugee and Migrant Response Plan (RMRP) was launched in November 2019. It sought \$1.35 billion to assist 4 million Venezuelans as well as host communities in receiving countries. The RMRP outlines the response across nine key sectors of intervention, with a strong focus on the socio-economic inclusion of refugees and migrants. In this context, UNHCR has greatly increased its presence, alongside that of its partners, and expanded its humanitarian response to support Venezuelan nationals across the region. In this context, regional support spaces remain one of the primary means of providing legal, psychosocial and essential services to respond to the urgent needs of refugees and asylum-seekers. There are more than 100 support spaces located in the border areas, along transit routes and in cities with a high concentration of Venezuelans, and UNHCR has been working with national authorities in the region to further increase the number. Additionally, a regional service mapping tool was developed to provide up-to-date online information to service providers, refugees and migrants. Furthermore, an inter-agency assessment was conducted across 15 countries to assess the information and communication needs of refugees and migrants in the region. The assessment covered more than 3,400 refugees and migrants from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) and other countries, as well as host communities. Outcomes will serve to increase UNHCR’s impact and inform its strategies for communicating with communities in 2020.

Inside Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), UNHCR increased the number of community-based projects. These aim to prevent displacement, mitigate protection risks and strengthen the resilience of affected communities. They include activities in the areas of education, health care, shelter, social cohesion, water and sanitation as well as the provision of core relief items. Within the Humanitarian Response Plan for Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), UNHCR leads the protection cluster and the cluster responsible for shelter, non-food items and energy in relation to internally displaced persons (IDPs), and continues to provide international protection to refugees and asylum-seekers.

#### *Colombia situation*

The security situation remained complex along Colombia’s border with Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), its southern borders and the Pacific Coast as a result of ongoing reconfigurations within the organizational structures of illegal armed groups, in the wake of the peace process. This has directly affected humanitarian access, continued to cause internal displacement and has resulted in the confinement of an increasing number of communities (over 17,000 persons affected in 2019). Chronic displacement and restrictions on movement are common in these areas and predominantly affect indigenous people and afro-Colombians, particularly in the Choco and Nariño departments. In 2019, over 89,700 people were newly displaced and were in need of humanitarian assistance, and 3,200 newly displaced people were registered in January of this year alone. There is increasing concern over the impact of ongoing violence and displacement on Venezuelan arrivals in some of these areas.

Encouragingly, discussions are being held among State authorities on the extension of the law on victims and land restitution. In addition, UNHCR is working closely with newly elected local and regional authorities to ensure the inclusion of IDPs in development plans, which are currently being designed to span over the next four years.

In Ecuador, over 5,000 Colombian nationals sought asylum in 2019, at an average rate of some 500 asylum applications per month. Notwithstanding this, the number of asylum claims made by Venezuelans has now surpassed those made by Colombians, straining the capacity of Ecuador to address two distinct displacement crises.

#### *North of Central America situation*

Violent crimes, insecurity and economic hardship continue to force thousands of people to flee their countries in the north of Central America (NCA) region. In 2019, 387,000 refugees and asylum-seekers from El Salvador, Guatemala and Honduras were forced to leave their homes in search of protection. Across the region, close to 54,000 new asylum applications were lodged in the first six months of the year, an 86 per cent increase compared with the same period in 2018. Levels of internal displacement are also historically high for the region, with more than 300,000 people displaced within El Salvador and Honduras.

The activities carried out under the Comprehensive Regional Protection and Solutions Framework, known in the region by its Spanish acronym MIRPS, continue to demonstrate the value of responsibility-sharing in responding to this displacement situation. In 2019, the MIRPS grew to include El Salvador, and is now comprised of seven countries (Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Panama). Over the past year, MIRPS countries pursued the development and enhancement of their national plans. This has had the effect of improving access to legal protection, social protection, formal labour markets and other livelihood opportunities. It has also improved local integration and increased investment in education. In November, during the second annual meeting of the MIRPS countries, they committed to coordinating their responses over the short-, medium- and long-term to address displacement and reinforce protection across the region, with solutions to include internal relocation and resettlement, as well as family reunification. The declaration of the meeting calls on MIRPS countries to adopt laws enabling refugees and asylum-seekers to access the labour market and integrate into local communities. Furthermore, a support platform for the MIRPS was launched in Geneva in December 2019 during the Global Refugee Forum (GRF), to mobilize political, technical and financial support to address the needs of displaced populations in the subregion.

In El Salvador, a new law protecting IDPs was passed by the legislative assembly in January 2020. Drafted with technical support from UNHCR, this legislation provides for, for the first time, the establishment of a comprehensive national system that brings together a wide variety of State institutions to collaborate in the response to, and prevention of, forced displacement. It also establishes mechanisms to allow people affected by internal displacement to protect and claim properties that they may have been forced to abandon in their flight.

In Mexico, the refugee assistance commission opened three new offices and a new registration centre to process asylum claims, which increased drastically to 70,300 in 2019, up 137 per cent compared with the previous year. UNHCR provided technical and financial assistance to this end, as well as support for the development of a legal and institutional framework to prevent and respond to internal displacement.

Under the Migration Protection Protocol (MPP) currently implemented in the United States of America, over 60,000 potential asylum-seekers were returned to Mexico in 2019 to await their respective court hearings. In this context, ensuring adequate reception conditions and the delivery of humanitarian assistance remains challenging. Furthermore, safety and security conditions in certain locations pose serious concern. In northern Mexico, UNHCR has scaled up its response to provide protection counselling and essential protection services to persons of concern, including those returned under the MPP.

Compounding the MPP is the ongoing effect of a new policy adopted this past year in the United States of America that bars eligibility for asylum-seekers who have crossed the

country's southern border after passing through a third country where they could have applied for asylum. Such measures play a decisive role in defining policies and their impact in the subregion. Although the scale of forced displacement and the complexity of mixed population movements weigh heavily on the region's stability, a few States continue to tighten their migration control policies, criminalize irregular migration and close border entry points. UNHCR stands ready to provide advice and support to ensure all governments concerned adhere to their protection obligations set forth in the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.

#### *Nicaragua*

Since the political unrest and economic trouble started in April 2018, nearly 100,000 Nicaraguans are estimated to have fled their homes and sought safety abroad. The political process is stalled, and reports of serious human rights violations are increasing. In Costa Rica, the number of asylum-seekers from Nicaragua had reached almost 55,000 at the end of 2019, with 20,000 pending registration. In Central America, as well as in a number of European countries, there has also been a sharp increase in the number of asylum requests from Nicaraguans which, combined, amount to more than 15,000 claims. In Honduras and El Salvador specifically, the arrival of Nicaraguan asylum-seekers is placing considerable strain on a very limited asylum capacity.

## **B. Regional strategic priorities**

#### *Global Refugee Forum: regional contributions*

A wide variety of stakeholders from the Americas attended the GRF and demonstrated commendable solidarity in their commitments towards achieving the goals of the Global Compact on Refugees. Participants submitted pledges in areas such as asylum capacity-building, education, jobs and livelihoods, and solutions. A high-level side event on the MIRPS was organized and led by the High Commissioner for Refugees and the President of Costa Rica. States attending the event had the opportunity to present their achievements and requirements, based on an [innovative quantification tool](#), while traditional and non-traditional donors were given an opportunity to pledge their support.

#### *Access to asylum*

UNHCR continued to support national asylum systems and refugee commissions in Argentina, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Uruguay and Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of). This work focused on the development of biometric registration and case management systems, as well as databases with adequate data protection safeguards that enhance targeting, caseload management, statistical production and the issuance of documentation. In Brazil, UNHCR continued to support pre-documentation and counselling activities aimed at facilitating access to asylum. In the NCA region, where fragile asylum systems are under the strain of certain regional policies, including cooperation agreements, UNHCR enhanced its support to asylum authorities and national human rights institutions, in line with the MIRPS plan of action.

Some countries have taken steps to apply the extended refugee definition under the Cartagena Declaration and national legislation, and are developing simplified or accelerated refugee status determination case processing modalities. For instance, the Brazilian Government granted refugee status on a prima facie basis for Venezuelan nationals through a procedure which forgoes the individual interview for manifestly well-founded cases. Under this modality, over 21,400 refugees were recognized in December 2019 and more than 17,000 in January 2020. Similarly, Paraguay carried out group recognition exercises in December 2019, which benefited more than 700 Venezuelans. The refugee commissions of Argentina, Mexico and Uruguay continued applying the regional definition and improving their procedures to accelerate the recognition of Venezuelans as refugees.

In Mexico City, the third regional roundtable of the asylum quality assurance initiative (QAI) was held in October 2019. Considering the large-scale movements occurring in the region, the roundtable provided an opportunity for States to discuss with UNHCR ways to improve their asylum systems. They underscored the importance of developing biometric

registration and case management systems, and establishing differentiated refugee status determination procedures. Participants welcomed the proposals to: improve the production of country of origin information through capacity-building; develop a one-year training and mentoring/twinning programme for newly recruited registration and eligibility officers; and design a regional online platform to exchange tools and good practices.

In the Caribbean subregion, most countries lack asylum legislation and systems. Where necessary, UNHCR undertakes registration and refugee status determination. Furthermore, in Trinidad and Tobago, alternative pathways to legal residence were established. Refugees and migrants from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), including those in irregular situations, were registered by the Government of Trinidad and Tobago, and granted work permissions for up to six months.

In Belize, reception conditions were improved by routinely training Government authorities on enhanced standard operating procedures for referral pathways benefiting asylum-seekers. Steps were also taken to reach the standards set out in the QAI, which Belize had formally accepted to adopt in November 2018. In Belize, the QAI is supported by a twinning programme with Costa Rica which focuses on exchanging mutual MIRPS and refugee status determination experiences. In Costa Rica, State authorities opened a field office in Upala, which has enabled persons with international protection needs located on the northern border to gain faster access to assistance. In Mexico, the refugee commission created a specialized registration directorate, and new offices were opened. In Tapachula, where 60 per cent of all claims are made, the newly-opened office was able to process existing registration backlogs.

In December 2019, UNHCR submitted comments on the draft inter-American principles on the human rights of migrants, refugees, stateless persons, victims of trafficking and internally displaced persons, adopted by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States.

#### *Protection and specific needs*

The conditions in which persons of concern to UNHCR transit through the region make them particularly vulnerable to protection risks. Those with specific needs, such as women, children, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons, older persons, persons with disabilities, Afrodescendants and indigenous people, are at heightened risk of family separation, gender-based violence, trafficking and other forms of abuse.

To respond to these needs, the Regional Safe Spaces Network (RSSN) released a "[Regional toolkit on protection from exploitation and abuse, and sexual harassment, and inter-agency community-based complaint referral mechanism in the Americas](#)". The toolkit was developed in line with Inter-Agency Standing Committee commitments and the Americas age, gender, and diversity action plan, and includes key actions such as expanding safe space networks and putting effective sexual exploitation and abuse, and sexual harassment complaint mechanisms into place. During the second quarter of 2019, the RSSN provided capacity-building to 11,910 partner staff from the NCA region: 4,252 from Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) and 649 from other countries. The training covered sexual and gender-based child protection, safe spaces and referral pathways. In Central America, the safe space network has welcomed a total of 120,000 people, including 50,000 last year alone, providing humanitarian assistance and specialized services for persons with specific needs. Since the rollout of the age, gender and diversity policy, a regional action plan has been developed which sets out nine key actions and a set of interventions to advance the policy regionally.

#### *Registration*

UNHCR uses its Population Registration and Identity Management EcoSystem (PRIMES) tool in the region to identify vulnerable persons of concern and facilitate the delivery of assistance, services and protection, and ensure the prevention of fraud. To date, PRIMES is in use across 15 operations in the Americas, including in UNHCR and partner offices in Central America where it has aided in putting in place the protection transfer arrangement. Some 53,000 individuals were registered in UNHCR's proGres v4 database from September to mid-December 2019, bringing the total to over 142,000 registered in

2019. In addition, the Governments of Ecuador and Guyana have adopted PRIMES as their own registration system.

UNHCR continued using the regional protection monitoring system which is now in place in 11 operations. Through this system, over 5,500 interviews were conducted, covering some 15,500 individuals mostly in the context of displacement from Venezuela (Bolivarian Rep. of), between July and December 2019. Protection monitoring contributed to strengthening community outreach, the identification and referral of persons with specific needs, mapping of services, and evidence-based advocacy. Likewise the protection monitoring tool is used as one of the targeting tools for ensuring the provision of assistance to the most vulnerable.

#### *Comprehensive solutions*

UNHCR continued to implement its global livelihoods strategy in the Americas with a view to including persons of concern in national plans and policies. In this context, and to improve collaboration with the private sector, six inter-agency employment and entrepreneurship fora were held in Brazil, Costa Rica, Ecuador and Panama. In Panama, UNHCR developed an innovative employability programme called “Talento sin Fronteras” (talent without borders) in association with Manpower and the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society. To date, 229 persons have been trained through the programme, and for those refugees with a valid work permit, a 58 per cent employment rate has been reached. In line with the Global Compact on Refugees, the programme supports refugees and asylum-seekers as well as the populations hosting them. In Ecuador, UNHCR collaborated with the Quito Municipality Economic Development Agency as well as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) to provide skills training and networking advice to 120 entrepreneurs, with a view to assisting them in the creation and development of their own businesses and enabling them to hire refugees. UNHCR recognizes the pivotal role played by cities and local authorities in the socio-economic inclusion of refugees and migrants, and is working with them to improve their response and reception capacities. With support from the European Union, UNHCR, IOM and the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) initiated a joint multi-year project to support inclusive cities for Venezuelan refugees and migrants in Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador and Peru.

The “cities of solidarity” initiative, which is embedded in the [Brazil Plan of Action](#), aims to enhance operational, multi-stakeholder responses in urban settings, with a view to advancing integration and building institutional responses. The initiative will be rolled out in the first quarter of 2020 in municipalities across four countries. In Brazil, UNHCR is working with the federal Government on an innovative local integration strategy. Under it, Venezuelan refugees and migrants are being internally relocated from isolated northern regions of Brazil to municipalities throughout the Brazil. Some 30,000 people have been relocated in this manner to over 400 municipalities across the country. The scheme brings together various United Nations agencies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and private sector entities, as well as federal and local governments, to support the social, economic and cultural integration of this population. These efforts also include partnership agreements with a variety of organizations, including the International Finance Corporation, the World Bank, the Sodexo group and Casa Museo in São Paulo, as well the Santos football club. These partnerships are expected to increase employment and integration opportunities for persons of concern to UNHCR and to help combat xenophobia.

In Mexico, UNHCR worked with federal and State authorities and the private sector to enhance the country’s labour market integration programme. In 2019, the programme was scaled up and nearly 5,200 refugees and asylum-seekers were relocated from southern States to cities in the central and northern parts of the country, where there is a high demand for labour and a favourable climate for social inclusion. In addition, some 32,950 on-site interventions aimed at facilitating local integration were undertaken by UNHCR; these included home visits, naturalization assistance and cash-based support.

In Argentina, the country's community sponsorship programme has received 443 Syrian refugees since 2014, and preparations are underway to resettle an additional 150 in 2020, including refugees from the Middle East and North Africa region.

Overall, progress was also made through the protection transfer arrangement which provides access to protection and permanent solutions to individuals who face imminent risk in their country of origin, as an alternative to undertaking dangerous onward movements. Of over 3,700 people identified since its inception, almost 700 persons from the NCA region have been resettled through the protection transfer arrangement. With the support of the [Emerging Resettlement Countries Joint Support Mechanism](#), Brazil is implementing its first-ever State-funded resettlement programme, focusing mainly on refugees from the NCA region. The Brazilian Government is also developing a community-based sponsorship model to engage community members in welcoming additional numbers of resettled refugees through UNHCR's identification and referral mechanisms. Efforts are ongoing to expand solutions to third countries such as Argentina, Brazil and Uruguay, in keeping with UNHCR's three-year strategy on resettlement and complementary pathways, and pledges made at the GRF. In Uruguay, a two-year pilot programme started in 2017, with support from the United States Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), was successfully completed. It allowed 10 refugee families referred by UNHCR from the NCA to be resettled through the transfer arrangement.

#### *Eradication of statelessness*

With a view to the Americas becoming the first continent to eradicate statelessness, UNHCR actively engaged with States, partners and regional organizations in the Americas to present concrete pledges and commitments at the high-level segment on statelessness held during the seventieth session of the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme in October 2019. In particular, Argentina, Belize, Colombia, Costa Rica, Guyana, Haiti, Panama, Paraguay, Uruguay and the United States of America presented 32 pledges aimed at eradicating statelessness in the region by 2024. On the same occasion, Colombia deposited instruments of accession to the 1954 Convention relating to the Status of Stateless Persons. Furthermore, Argentina adopted comprehensive legislation for the protection of stateless persons which includes provisions for their naturalization.

The Latin American and Caribbean Council for Civil Registration, Identity and Vital Statistics (CLARCIEV) held its annual meeting in Chile in September 2019, with support from UNHCR, the Organization of American States and its Universal Civil Identity Program in the Americas. In the context of the preparations for the high-level segment on statelessness, CLARCIEV pledged to continue promoting universal birth registration, the issuance of identity documents, and actions to prevent and resolve statelessness. CLARCIEV also committed to developing and implementing national, bilateral and multilateral projects aimed at eradicating statelessness, especially in the context of large population movements. In light of this, a comparative study on statelessness and late birth registration is now underway and co-led by UNHCR, the Organization of American States and CLARCIEV.

### **C. Financial information**

In October 2019, the Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme approved a budget of \$468 million for the Americas for 2020. By the end of January 2020, the total budget for the Americas amounted to \$505.5 million. This was due to an increase of \$37.5 million from the "new and additional activities – mandate-related" reserve for the response in Guatemala, following the declaration of an L2 emergency, as well as operations across the region affected by the Venezuela situation.

As of 31 January 2020, the needs of the Americas were 9 per cent funded, after considering the indicative allocation of unearmarked and softly earmarked contributions.