

Strengthening Protection in Mexico, Central America and Cuba



Context

The region continues to see a steady growth in migrants, with proportionately smaller numbers of asylum-seekers amongst them. Many undocumented Central and South American, as well as extra-continental migrants from Africa, Asia, the Middle East and other locations, emigrate to Central America and Mexico. In a restricted immigration environment with strict border controls (following the terrorist attacks in the United States on 11 September 2001), UNHCR continues to undertake additional efforts to ensure countries' compliance with refugee law.

In Mexico and Central America, UNHCR strengthens and/or develops asylum systems in each country. The Office reinforces national refugee status determination (RSD) procedures; strengthens the protection networks (where local agencies involved in migration and human rights issues act as referrals for individuals seeking asylum, and provide them with the needed orientation and assistance); raises public awareness and support for UNHCR; and finds durable solutions for refugees in the region, especially those with long periods of residency in Central America who have not yet received naturalisation.

In Mexico, UNHCR supports the implementation of the Government's *ad hoc* RSD procedure and the development of practices in accordance with international standards and UNHCR guidelines. The Office also trains government authorities in refugee law and provides them with technical support and advice on legislation.

In its role as observer, UNHCR is also advocating for the protection of refugees and their rights within the framework of the Regional Migration Conference (the Puebla Process), pursuant to the Conference's Plan of Action.

In **Belize**, UNHCR is undergoing negotiations with the Government in order to reactivate the RSD process.

In **Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua**, UNHCR is providing basic assistance to small groups of recently arrived refugees of different nationalities (Afghanistan, Colombia, Ethiopia, the Islamic Republic of Iran, and Liberia). In addition, over recent years UNHCR has promoted the naturalisation of long-term Central American refugees, resulting in the country's adoption of a decree granting long-term refugees with permanent residence status. In **El Salvador**, UNHCR is working with the Government on the elaboration of a decree to implement the recently adopted law on asylum.

In **Cuba**, UNHCR adjudicates new asylum requests under mandate. The Office also negotiates with government authorities the extension of the "authorisation-of-stay" for refugees, and pursues the resettlement of refugees as a durable solution. For the time being local integration is still not a feasible option for refugees in Cuba. Although no concrete progress has been made with regard to the country's accession to international refugee instruments, nonetheless, the Cuban Government continues to express willingness to consider accession to the 1967 Protocol sometime in the future.

UNHCR Beneficiaries by status (June 2003 statistics)		Legal Framework
Refugees:	16,190	With the exception of Cuba, all of the countries in Mexico and in Central America are parties to the 1951 Convention (Guatemala, Honduras and Mexico with reservations) and its 1967 Protocol.
Belize	940	
Cuba	980	
El Salvador	70	
Guatemala	730	
Honduras	20	
Mexico	13,120	
Nicaragua	330	
Asylum-seekers:	100	
Belize	10	
Cuba	5	
El Salvador	10	
Guatemala	3	
Honduras	2	
Mexico	50	
Nicaragua	20	

Main Objectives

- Maintain gender equity as a strong component in all of UNHCR's programmes and activities.
- Develop a consensus amongst the various governments on refugee rights and related humanitarian issues at the regional level.
- Promote the full application of the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol by the Governments in Mexico and in Central America.
- Strengthen the protection networks to ensure that civil society plays a role in the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers.
- Through public information campaigns, increase public awareness of the plight of refugees and their right to seek and enjoy asylum.
- Reinforce durable solutions for urban refugees through local integration and self-reliance mechanisms.
- Commence micro-credit systems for urban refugees.

Projects and Budget (in USD)

CUB/200: Care and maintenance of refugees in Cuba: USD 316,800.

CUB/300: Return to Algeria of Saharawi Refugees Students: USD 158,600.

NLA/400: Material and legal assistance in Mexico and Central America: USD 591,099.

NLA/402: Promotion of Refugee law and National Capacities: USD 444,526.

UNHCR's Government Counterpart in Mexico

Commission Mexicana de Ayuda a los Refugiados (COMAR): Created during the 1980's, this commission deals with RSD and the documentation for refugees since March 2001. It is the major counterpart for UNHCR.

Implementing Partners

Mexico:

Albergue Belén: Works with immigrants and refugees in Tapachula.

Amnesty International: Increases the public's awareness on the situation of urban refugees in Mexico city.

Sin Fronteras: Provides assistance and legal support to refugees and asylum-seekers in Mexico City.

United Nations Volunteers: Provides support to public information activities in Mexico, and to community services in Tapachula.

In the other countries, the national NGOs are mainly responsible for delivering assistance and legal support to refugees and asylum-seekers.

Belize:

Help for Progress Sectors

El Salvador:

Fundación de Estudios para la Aplicación del Derecho (FESPAD)

Guatemala:

Asociación de Apoyo Integral (ASI)

Honduras:

Centro de Investigación y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos (CIPRODEH)

Nicaragua:

Consejo de Iglesias Evangélicas Pro-Alianza Denominacional (CEPAD)