



# Northern South America

## Recent developments

As the conflict in Colombia continues, increasing numbers of people are displaced within the country or take flight to neighbouring countries. Colombians make up the vast majority of refugees and asylum-seekers in the region. However, it is believed that there are many more “invisible” Colombian refugees. To protect themselves from selective killings, trafficking, harassment, forced recruitment and extortion, many Colombians prefer not to come forward and request asylum. This may be partly attributable to a lack of awareness of rights and entitlements; however, by and large, it is in response to inadequate asylum regimes and lack of security, particularly in border areas. It is therefore very difficult to obtain reliable estimates of numbers of Colombians fleeing violence who are potentially of concern to UNHCR. The number of recognized refugees and asylum-seekers in the region stood at 33,205 persons in July 2005, with Colombians making up the largest group. However, the number of Colombian persons of concern in Ecuador, Venezuela, Panama and Costa Rica is believed to be more than half a million. The number of Colombians seeking protection outside the region has remained stable, with some 9,000 persons having sought asylum in countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2004.

Colombia  
Costa Rica  
Ecuador  
Guyana  
Panama  
Peru  
Suriname  
Venezuela



## Strategic objectives

The *Agenda for Protection* and the Mexico Plan of Action will provide the basis for UNHCR's strategy in the region. For the countries in northern South America, this will embrace the promotion of an effective response by States and civil society and focus on protection and assistance to persons of concern both in border areas ("Borders of Solidarity/*Fronteras Solidarias*") and urban areas ("Cities of Solidarity/*Ciudades Solidarias*"). Refugees and asylum-seekers in the region are generally able to move freely, provided they have access to asylum procedures, have registered and hold valid identity cards. Many refugees move to cities, not only to seek work but also very often for protection reasons. For UNHCR's partners, outreach work is hampered by the refugees' mobility and the "invisibility" of the many who do not formally seek asylum. For this reason, the UNHCR's presence in Ecuador, Venezuela and Costa Rica has been strengthened and will be consolidated. One of UNHCR's main objectives is capacity building and training of authorities on refugee law, particularly along borders. Enhancing protection networks and fostering strategic alliances, at the country

and local levels, with government entities, including Ombudsman offices, NGOs, UN agencies, the media and donors, are therefore major objectives.

Voluntary repatriation of Colombians has not occurred on a significant scale. UNHCR will pursue local integration and promotion of self-reliance in border communities and urban areas through a community development and gender- and age-sensitive approach (Venezuela and Ecuador were among the pilot countries which have successfully implemented the gender, age and diversity policy, followed by Panama and Costa Rica in 2005). The community support and integration programmes in Venezuela, Ecuador and Panama began in 2003. Self-reliance projects for the mainly urban refugees in Costa Rica will continue, including micro-credit, vocational training and job placement initiatives and community-based child care centres that were piloted in 2005. Although persons of concern from Colombia tend to arrive singly or in small groups, major influxes cannot be ruled out, therefore there is a need to maintain some degree of emergency preparedness.

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## Operations

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**Costa Rica** hosts the second largest population of Colombian refugees in Latin America. The refugee population reported as at January 2005 was 10,850, of whom more than 80 per cent are Colombian nationals. Official updated government figures are not available but it is estimated that approximately 100 to 150 new asylum requests are received each month. The limited prospects for voluntary repatriation have made local integration the principal objective of the Office in Costa Rica. The continuing arrival of new refugees has had an important impact in a society where the immigrant population is estimated at 10 per cent of the total population. Access to gainful employment continues to be the key limiting factor to the local integration of refugees in Costa Rica, as xenophobia, employers' lack of recognition of refugee rights and lack of documentation continue to block otherwise qualified refugee candidates. Moreover, employed refugees are generally working in jobs below the level of their occupational skills and struggle to make a living. UNHCR will continue to address the limitations to local integration in order to avert the risk of a protracted refugee situation. This will involve expanding the very successful micro-credit programme, the promotion of occupational training and increased support for child care initiatives to help women find and maintain employment. The significant deterioration in security for Colombian refugees in recent years continues to oblige UNHCR to process an increasing number of cases for resettlement involving people whose safety cannot be assured by local authorities. Resettlement submissions from Costa Rica are almost always based on legal protection and physical security-related problems. UNHCR has made great progress in bringing refugee and migration issues to the attention of the UN Country Team, and will continue to pursue the inclusion of refugee issues within the remit of the working group on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The number of asylum-seekers has declined since the introduction in **Ecuador** in May 2004 of the requirement that asylum-seekers provide proof of a clean criminal record, a document that can only be obtained in urban areas of Colombia. However, Ecuador still continues to receive the highest

number of asylum-seekers in the countries surrounding Colombia. More than 30,000 persons have requested asylum over the last five years, of whom over 10,700 had been recognized at the end of August 2005. The total number of Colombians who have crossed into Ecuador is, however, much higher. Based on reliable official figures, UNHCR and the Government estimate at 250,000 the number of Colombians of concern to the Office. In this context, UNHCR is continuing in its discussions with the Ecuadorian Government to advocate for mechanisms to prevent migratory measures from undermining protection safeguards for persons in need of international protection. The spill-over effects of the Colombian conflict are compounded by serious domestic socio-economic problems that affect local and refugee populations alike, such as high rates of unemployment and under-employment and low levels of school enrolment, as reflected in participatory assessments carried out under the gender, age and diversity pilot project.

The Government of Ecuador pursues a policy which allows for local integration. Opportunities exist to develop a more integrated approach with the help of line ministries, local authorities, bilateral development agencies, civil society actors and UN agencies, and the Government has shown willingness to include refugees in central and local development plans. Due to this favourable environment, Ecuador has been chosen as a pilot country for the Development Assistance for Refugees (DAR) programme. In coordination with the Government and other actors, UNHCR's strategy will include the expansion of community support and integration programmes with a particular focus on self-reliance. UNHCR will also seek to ensure the inclusion of refugee issues under efforts to achieve relevant MDGs, particularly in the underdeveloped areas of northern Ecuador. Resettlement continues to be a significant element in the strengthening of the protection capacity of UNHCR in Ecuador as many refugees face physical protection risks and, especially for women-at-risk, there are few solutions involving local integration. The Resettlement Unit of UNHCR Ecuador therefore plans to refer at least 650 people for resettlement. Some 200 to 250 of these will be resettled to the emerging resettlement countries in the region, in the framework of



Venezuela: Colombian refugees in a shanty town in Urena village, near Tachira river. UNHCR / B. Heger

the third operational pillar of the Mexico Plan of Action: South-South resettlement (“Resettlement in Solidarity/*Reasentamiento Solidario*”).

Over the last two years, there has been an improvement in the protection and overall situation of refugees, asylum-seekers and other persons of concern in **Panama**. The national legal refugee framework, key parts of which are precarious and inconsistent with international refugee law, will hopefully be soon under review. The number of refugees and asylum-seekers stands at over 1,800 but UNHCR believes there to be another 10,000 persons of concern, mostly Colombians, on Panamanian territory. Over the past year, a change has been observed in the pattern of arrivals of new asylum-seekers, especially with respect to Colombians. The numbers of persons from rural backgrounds crossing into poor areas along the Colombian-Panamanian border have been steadily declining, whereas in urban areas (most notably Panama City) arrivals of professionals and small-scale entrepreneurs have gradually increased. Accordingly, UNHCR is giving increasing priority to urban areas, while maintaining a regular presence at the border. For both populations, the focus is on providing increased legal and economic stability. The Government has

in principle agreed to change the migratory status of Colombians under temporary protection at the border. However, pending implementation of this agreement, the precarious legal and economic situation of this population will not improve and they will remain dependent on external protection and aid. Hopes of providing permanent residence to some 400 long-staying refugees from Nicaragua and El Salvador have been further delayed as the Government considers that permanent residence can only be conferred through a revision of the immigration law. UNHCR’s main preoccupation will be with the improvement of the national legal refugee framework. The overall goal in terms of assistance is to increase partnerships and work towards a major engagement of the Government in the provision of basic services.

There are also increasing numbers of Colombian citizens in need of protection in **Peru**. In 2004, 120 persons applied for asylum and during the first four months of 2005, 63 persons had lodged applications. According to UNHCR’s implementing partner in Peru, small groups of Colombians in need of protection have managed to enter border communities. However, due to the geographical conditions and security situation of the border area, it has been extremely difficult to gain access

to them. Monitoring activities in border areas are being carried out with the support of UNHCR's implementing partner and local authorities. In 2006, the Regional Office in Venezuela, which covers Peru, will reinforce alert and response mechanisms by strengthening the protection network and increasing its capacity to provide minimum standards of emergency humanitarian assistance for those entering isolated communities along the border.

The number of Colombians in **Venezuela** is barely reflected in official statistics. Based on estimates from a number of official sources, it is believed that the number of persons of concern is 270,000. In the context of the registration exercise (*Misión Identidad*) which the Government carried out in 2004 and 2005, as many as 400,000 undocumented foreigners were regularized, many of them Colombians. By comparison, the number of officially recognized refugees stands at less than 400 and the number of asylum-seekers registered by the National Refugee Commission (NRC) just over 4,000. Significant strides have been made recently in the area of institutional development, such as the establishment of the NRC and its Regional Technical Secretariats (RTS) in the three border states of Apure, Tachira, and Zulia. Nonetheless, the operational capacity of both the NRC and the RTS remains low, as reflected by the modest number of registered asylum-seekers, the problematic issuance of identity documentation for asylum-seekers and refugees and the backlog of applications. In 2006, the priority will be to provide an effective asylum response to the large number of Colombians in need of protection, especially in border regions. This will focus primarily on the enhancement of local capacities and the establishment and consolidation of networks that involve UN agencies, church and civil society organizations, as well as further promotion of the inclusion of persons of concern in governmental social programmes. With large revenues from oil, the Venezuelan Government has concentrated efforts on improving health, educational and welfare policies, the so-called *Misiones*, during 2005, and many Colombians in poor communities along the border and marginalized urban neighbourhoods could benefit. The economic situation continues however to be critical especially in the border states. Therefore, UNHCR's Regional Office in Venezuela

will continue to provide material assistance to vulnerable refugees and asylum-seekers through its implementing partners. It will also further concentrate on the community support and integration programmes, in an effort to foster self-reliance for persons of concern and to mitigate any adverse impact on host communities by providing support in the areas of health, education and infrastructure.

Public information in the countries of the subregion is of great importance: firstly, as a means of impressing upon the general public the difference between a person in need of international protection and an economic migrant; and secondly, as a powerful tool for reaching out to persons of concern to inform them of their rights and asylum procedures. In particular in Venezuela and Ecuador, information campaigns through local mass media in host communities will continue to be an important element in the registration and documentation campaigns. In Costa Rica, public information efforts continue to focus strategically on two broad areas: dispel rising xenophobic sentiments often fuelled by the press, by better educating journalists and editors from influential media outlets on the "facts and fictions" about refugees, while at the same time informing municipal authorities and prospective employers about refugee rights and obligations as stipulated by the law. In 2006, a public information strategy will provide a common framework and coordinate activities for all countries in the region.

<b>Budget (USD)</b>	
<b>Country</b>	<b>Annual Programme Budget</b>
Colombia	8,443,625
Costa Rica	1,705,293
Ecuador	3,944,085
Panama	857,493
Venezuela	1,841,696
Regional activities <sup>1</sup>	1,100,000
<b>Total</b>	<b>17,892,192</b>

<sup>1</sup> Includes care and maintenance and durable solutions to refugees in Northern South America.