

Update on UNHCR's operations in the Americas Executive Committee 2009

Part A: Major developments

- November 2009 marks the 25th Anniversary of the Cartagena Refugee Declaration and the 5th Anniversary of the adoption of the Mexico Declaration and Plan of Action, drawing renewed attention to refugee protection and the search for durable solutions in the context of increased solidarity within countries of the region. The framework of the Plan of Action has been included in the State policies of several countries and, although mainly directed towards refugees and asylum seekers, has been adapted and expanded to the situation of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Colombia. Increased attention, including improved strategic coordination, has been placed on the situation of urban refugees through the *Cities of Solidarity* programme. The *Resettlement in Solidarity* programme has created new opportunities for durable solutions and a new South-South approach to UNHCR's resettlement programme. *Borders of Solidarity* has also shaped new programmes through efforts in countries bordering Colombia.
- In Honduras, the political crisis that followed the ousting of the President, at the end of June, continues to be extremely complex. In spite of the ongoing mediation efforts promoted by the Organization of American States and various personalities, no agreement has been reached. UNHCR, in coordination with partners in the United Nations system, is closely monitoring the situation in the country as well as in neighbouring countries. In Nicaragua, which received a high number of asylum-seekers, support was provided to strengthen the newly established National Refugee Commission.
- Internal displacement in Colombia continued to affect a large number of persons. Notwithstanding positive developments in the implementation of national IDP policies, an escalation of violence and a significant aggravation of the humanitarian situation led to 280,000 new displacements in 2008, according to official figures, and a similar figure is expected for 2009. Meanwhile, more than 3 million Colombians remain displaced within the country and hundreds of thousands persons are in a refugee-like situation outside of Colombia's borders. Security and law enforcement have been at the top of the political agenda while diplomatic relations between the Andean nations have remained tense.
- The decentralization of the Bureau for the Americas was initiated in July 2009, with the establishment of the Deputy Director's office in Panama. The Bureau in Panama will cover the UN Regional Director's Team and - with the support of a legal and a technical regional hub - will provide support to UNHCR's operations in Latin America. The office in Panama will also develop a regional emergency preparedness and response capacity in Latin America.

Part B: Progress on implementation of UNHCR's global strategic objectives

Protecting internally displaced persons in Colombia

- UNHCR's main goal in Colombia remains to reinforce the capacity of the national authorities to address internal displacement in line with the constitutional framework and international law. UNHCR established 15 key targets for its operation in 2009, which serve as a tool to measure and demonstrate the impact of its work in Colombia.

- During this period, the State's budget for attention to IDPs further increased by 20 per cent and public policies were developed to protect and assist children, the elderly and ethnic minorities. So far 225,000 persons have been protected by the Land and Property Protection Project, benefiting some 3,800 IDPs. National identification documents were provided to 85,000 IDPs, out of which 40 per cent were indigenous or afro-Colombian. UNHCR's training project for the Colombian armed forces exceeded expectations, with over 1,700 members trained to date against an initial target of 1,000. In addition, in 63 districts affected by displacement, out of 80 planned for the year, an integrated approach for protection and support to the State response was implemented.
- As part of a regional approach, in coordination with the UNHCR offices in Ecuador and the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, cross-border activities were implemented, benefiting some 7,000 persons of concern and communities at risk of displacement.

Protecting refugees and other persons of concern

- Considerable progress was made with respect to the protection of refugees and asylum-seekers in countries neighbouring Colombia, with the successful completion of the registration and profiling exercise in two provinces of the northern border region of Ecuador; this resulted in the registration and recognition of more than 13,000 asylum-seekers who were until now 'invisible'. In the Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela, agreement was reached with the Government to strengthen the registration and status determination procedures in order to address the existing backlog of asylum claims.
- Refugee legislation was modified in Colombia, Costa Rica and Ecuador, in further alignment with international protection principles. Refugee law is under discussion in Chile, where the National Congress is expected to approve legislation in the coming weeks; and in Mexico, where a draft bill will be presented in Parliament in September. These draft laws largely take into account UNHCR proposals and recommendations. In addition, Belize is in the process of reactivating its refugee eligibility commission, whereas Argentina and Nicaragua have created eligibility commissions for the first time.
- To strengthen and move forward the implementation in the Americas of UNHCR's 10-Point Plan of Action on Refugee Protection and Mixed Migration, a Regional Conference on Refugee Protection and International Migration is being organized in Costa Rica on 19-20 November. The expected result of the Conference will be an operational strategy of the 10-Point Plan of Action, which will include new avenues of cooperation with regional initiatives such as the Regional Conference on Migration (Puebla Process) and the MERCOSUR free trade agreement.
- The new Administration in the United States is positively engaged in discussions of national protection issues with the Office. UNHCR has provided detailed inputs on revisions to current parole guidelines, to increase their effectiveness and compliance with international standards, and proposals for an expansion of the current alternatives to detention programmes. The High Commissioner has been invited to visit Washington, D.C. before the end of the year to evaluate progress in these areas. The House of Representatives has authorized funding for UNHCR and other actors to carry out activities aimed at reducing and preventing statelessness worldwide.
- Latin America has experienced an ever growing number of arrivals of asylum-seekers and migrants, especially from Africa and the Middle-East, which is posing a particular challenge to fragile asylum systems in the region. A regional strategy is under discussion in order to preserve

asylum space in the context of mixed movements of persons, smuggling, trafficking and organized crime. In the Caribbean, 130 new asylum-seekers were registered, half of whom were identified in detention. Since these cases all require mandate determination, in addition to the coordination of assistance and facilitation of alternatives to detention, the limited resources within the UNHCR Office in Washington, D.C. were stretched.

Finding durable solutions

- The countries of the Southern Cone reconfirmed their commitment to the *Resettlement in Solidarity* programme this year. Uruguay received the first group of 15 Colombian refugees from Ecuador. In addition to the solidarity component, this programme is also opening additional opportunities for finding durable solutions. In this regard it is important to mention the inclusion of Palestinian resettled refugees in the national housing programme in Chile.
- In Panama, within the framework of the law on the regularization of long-staying refugees, UNHCR continues to provide technical support to the State in order to provide permanent residence to over 400 refugees from Nicaragua and El Salvador, who have been in the country for more than two decades. UNHCR has also offered its support for the implementation of the recommendations made by a recent bi-national Commission to provide residency to more than 850 Colombians who arrived in the late 90s and are still under a temporary humanitarian protection regime.
- UNHCR submitted over 75 per cent (approximately 42,000 submissions) of the Office's resettlement referrals to the United States programme, receiving additional supplemental funding to increase its resettlement capacity worldwide.

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