

CENTRAL AMERICA

Belize
Costa Rica

El Salvador
Guatemala

Honduras
Mexico

Nicaragua



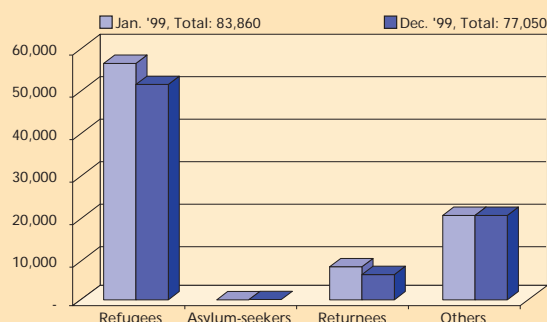
MAJOR DEVELOPMENTS

The completion of the Guatemalan repatriation operation in July 1999 was a historic milestone for the Guatemalan refugee population in the region. The final phase of local integration is now underway for 20,500 Guatemalans choosing to remain in Mexico, with the emphasis on naturalisation and economic self-sufficiency.

UNHCR's accession campaign has yielded results in the region. During the High Commissioner's visit in July 1999, the Government of Mexico announced its decision to ratify the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol. The President is expected to submit the legislation to the Senate for approval in 2000.

All UNHCR's programmes in the region have been designed to help resolve the predicament of long-staying Central American refugees stemming from years of conflict. UNHCR successfully campaigned for an extension to the residual refugee population in Costa Rica and Belize of the terms of amnesties originally applicable mainly to illegal aliens.

Persons of Concern to UNHCR



CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

Although addressing the situation of refugees was a priority for many governments during the past two decades, migration and human rights issues are increasingly attracting the attention of governments and civil society in the region. In January, El Salvador hosted the Fourth Regional Conference on Migration, an inter-governmental forum known informally as the "Puebla Process", in which UNHCR participates as an observer along with other international organisations. UNHCR's objective within the Puebla Process is to promote the implementation of an approach which balances the need for measures to regulate migration against the need to continue to protect genuine refugees and victims of human rights abuses.

PROGRESS TOWARDS SOLUTIONS

UNHCR is committed to strengthening asylum in the region through capacity-building and the reinforcement of protection networks. In addition to the promotion of Mexico's accession to international refugee instruments, UNHCR has continued to provide advice on the adoption of national refugee legislation in Guatemala, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras. UNHCR's active collaboration with a committee representing several Guatemalan institutions eased finalisation of draft refugee legislation. Presidential elections in December precluded signature in 1999, but this was expected to be only a minor technical delay. In El Salvador a draft refugee law is in its final stages and UNHCR has worked with the legislative assembly to promote its early enactment. In Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua, new immigration laws are under discussion.

In an effort to deepen understanding of refugee-related legislation and hasten implementation, 76 training seminars involving migration offices and border authorities, universities, commissions, NGOs, churches, and parliamentarians were organised throughout Mexico and Central America.

OPERATIONS

In addition to roughly 20,000 Guatemalan refugees in the three southern states of Mexico, there were 27,640 registered refugees within the region at the end of 1999. A total of 540 new asylum-seekers were registered, the majority in Costa Rica and Mexico. Most activities in the region were implemented under General Programmes. One Special Programme for repatriation, reintegration and local settlement of Guatemalan refugees was also implemented (please see separate chapter for details).

In **Mexico**, UNHCR promoted socio-economic and legal integration of long-staying urban refugees in order to reduce their dependency on humanitarian assistance. Permanent residence status or naturalisation was secured for 53 per cent of the long-staying urban refugee population. Recognised refugees are issued non-immigrant documents that accord the right to work. UNHCR also provided humanitarian assistance for newly arrived asylum-seekers, many of whom originated from outside the Americas. UNHCR has established strong working relationships with immigration authorities, based on a shared understanding of refugee law and procedures. The refugee protection network was significantly strengthened: 11 new agreements were established with various agencies to provide employment training, special workshops (for refugee women) and access to private and public services. The Office collaborated with the Commission for Human Rights and other government offices to train 399 migration officials on refugee protection. An essential objective was to nurture a culture of refugee protection in civil society. As part of the Inter-Institutional Programme on International Protection of the Person, and together with the National Commission on Human Rights and ICRC, UNHCR held training seminars on human rights and refugee law at five universities (involving 206 professors, including 97 women). Some 12,000 students benefited from an Education for Peace programme, which included refugee and human rights law.

In Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua, UNHCR focused on the need to adopt proper refugee legislation and increase knowledge of refugee law. Most of these countries are now working to incorporate provisions relating to refugees into existing legislation on migration. The Office continued to help governments to plan effectively for a possible influx of refugees by producing a handbook of guidelines on refugee status determination procedures.

In **Honduras**, the refugee section of the migration office was reopened and an ad hoc procedure established for the reception and processing of asylum applications. An internship in Costa Rica for Honduran migration officers enabled them to become familiar with eligibility procedures of potential use in their home country.

UNHCR continued its work with Congressmen and Government officials in **El Salvador** to promote adoption of the draft refugee law. The law was submitted to the Presidency, and will later be sent for approval to the Legislative Assembly. A total of 120 migration officers working at ports, airports and border posts

received training on refugee protection. This contributed to an increasingly positive relationship with the Ministry of Interior and migration authorities in El Salvador.

In **Costa Rica**, UNHCR continued to work with the Government to determine how many of the 150,000 amnesty applicants are refugees eligible for permanent residence. Assistance for long-staying Central American refugees was reduced to cover only emergency needs as most of them have by and large already integrated locally. Government statistics indicate that there are 22,900 refugees in the country. However, UNHCR continued to advise and support the migration office and help review refugee files so as to verify the exact number. A network of protection partners organised two significant regional gatherings to promote understanding of refugee issues. Together with Secretariado Episcopal de America Central (SEDAC), the Office organised a seminar on population movement, specifically focusing on refugees and migrants. A second workshop on human rights law and refugee protection, included the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights, the Inter-American Commission for Human Rights, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights and UNHCR staff from throughout the Americas. Both events provided excellent forums for strengthening inter-agency understanding and cooperation as well as for setting clear objectives with regard to refugee assistance.

Nicaragua continued to receive asylum-seekers, large numbers of whom originate from countries outside the continent, primarily in Africa. UNHCR worked with the foreign section of the Migration Bureau of Nicaragua to establish an ad hoc procedure as an interim measure. The Office also provided country of origin information to the migration office to assist in refugee status determination.

UNHCR maintained a small presence in **Belize**, primarily to monitor the attainment of durable solutions in the country. The Government decreed an amnesty for migrants, which also benefited non-registered refugees. UNHCR provided material and financial support to the Government to enable it to implement the amnesty. Overall registration for the amnesty exceeded expectations. Some 4,800 families of concern became eligible for permanent residence. As the processing of applicants was not completed by year's end, the project was extended into 2000. New policies in Belize allowed UNHCR to help 1,200 recognised refugees apply for naturalisation, of whom 619 had received nationality documents by the end of December. Despite increased opportunities for local integration, a group of 38 Guatemalans chose to repatriate. By the end of the year, UNHCR no longer fielded a presence in Belize, as durable solutions had been found for most of the refugees and persons of concern in the country. Outstanding issues will be handled by UNHCR's office in Mexico, in partnership with a Belizean NGO.



In **Guatemala**, UNHCR worked to create a broader-based protection and assistance network bringing together NGOs, churches, and groups involved with migration issues. Several meetings were held with various government, UN agencies, university bodies and NGOs to discuss their possible involvement. These efforts will continue in 2000. The Office continued to promote durable solutions for refugees in a number of ways. Eighty-three refugees voluntarily repatriated in 1999. Of the remaining 732 long-staying urban refugees, 125 received residence permits, and 14 applications were pending. Refugee women were specifically encouraged to register as economically independent and, whenever possible, to request authorisation to work. Refugee women also participated in a variety of training events, including workshops on income generation.

The micro-credit scheme initially designed for returnees was evaluated and redesigned and will be expanded to benefit refugees in 2000. The Office worked closely with the Directorate General for Migration to organise training on refugee rights and protection in the regional context for 60 migration officials.

FUNDING

Although UNHCR did not experience severe funding shortages for its programmes in the region, a general lack of funds for General Programmes affected its implementing capacity. As the agency reduced its activities in Central America, special efforts were made to raise public awareness and support for refugee issues.

Voluntary Contributions - Earmarked (USD)

Donor	Earmarking*	General Programmes		Special Programmes	
		Income	Contribution	Income	Contribution
CANADA	Rep./ Reint. Guatemala Ref.	0	0	544,218	544,218
FRANCE	Rep./ Reint. Guatemala Ref.	0	0	81,786	81,786
JAPAN	Guatemala	10,000	10,000	0	0
	Mexico	570,000	570,000	0	0
	Rep./ Reint. Guatemala Ref.	0	0	180,000	180,000
NORWAY	Rep./ Reint. Guatemala Ref.	0	0	337,136	337,136
SWEDEN	Rep./ Reint. Guatemala Ref.	0	0	168,840	168,840
ESPAÑA CON ACNUR (SPA)	Rep./ Reint. Guatemala Ref.	0	0	8,791	0
TOTAL **		580,000	580,000	1,320,771	1,311,980

* For more information on the various earmarkings, please refer to the Donor Profiles.

** Total funds available for obligation in the region also included unearmarked voluntary contributions, lightly earmarked contributions, opening balances and adjustments.

Budget and Expenditure (USD)

Country	Working Budget*		Expenditure*	
	General Programmes	Special Programmes	General Programmes	Special Programmes
Belize	914,602	0	914,600	0
Costa Rica	566,630	0	455,044	0
Guatemala	136,713	1,832,743	137,790	1,709,743
Mexico	8,534,729	410,126	8,519,625	466,905
Other Countries	1,018,468	132,561	910,110	110,000
TOTAL	11,171,142	2,375,430	10,937,169	2,286,647

* Figures do not include costs at Headquarters.