

A young girl with dark hair is looking upwards with a thoughtful expression. In the background, a large, ornate scale of justice is visible, symbolizing law and equity. The scene is set in what appears to be a courtroom or a formal hearing room.

Central America and Mexico

Operational highlights

- A series of protection workshops and seminars served to increase the regional capacity in protection issues and form a regional network of asylum lawyers. A capacity-building pilot project for border and migration officials in Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, El Salvador and Belize was launched to improve access to asylum procedures, strengthen protection monitoring capacities and reinforce networking.
- As a first step to strengthen protection and assistance, a mapping exercise on the situation of unaccompanied and separated children in migratory flows at Mexico's southern border was carried out.
- Durable solutions were found for a number of refugees. In Belize, 131 refugees were naturalized. In El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua, 55 refugees received permanent or temporary residence or were naturalized. In Guatemala, progress was made towards self-reliance.
- Regional coordination between UNHCR, implementing partners and Government officials was strengthened through a planning retreat in Mexico.

Belize

El Salvador

Guatemala

Honduras

Mexico

Nicaragua

Working environment

In Mexico, presidential elections in July led to a serious political impasse, as the margin between the two candidates was less than one per cent. The aftermath of



the elections was marked by protests by supporters of the defeated party, which paralysed parts of the capital for several weeks. Consequently, a number of important refugee issues and the implementation of the Mexico Plan of Action were put on hold.

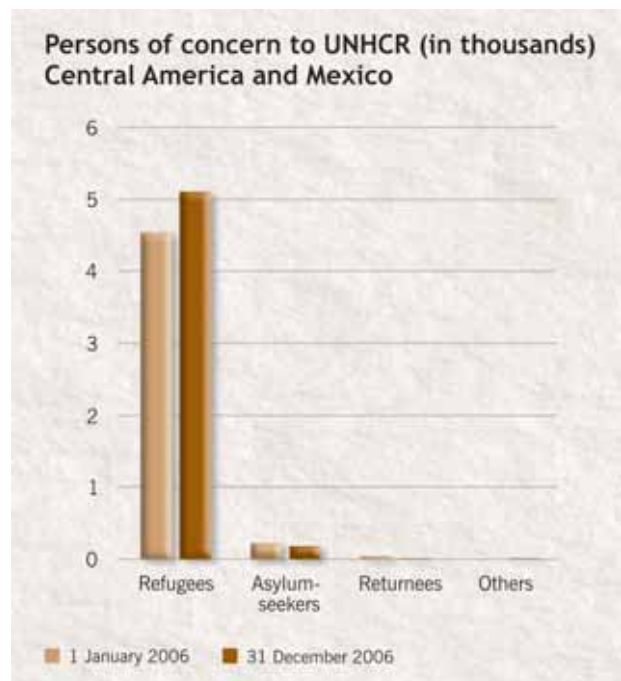
Recent changes at the political level also delayed changes in asylum legislation in Honduras and Nicaragua, where elections had taken place in November 2005 and November 2006 respectively.

Migratory movements in the region are characterized by a massive flow of undocumented migrants, including persons arriving through human trafficking, travelling from South to North. People in need of international protection are travelling within these movements. Most of the migrants come from Central American countries, where the socio-economic context is marked by poverty, growing insecurity and violence, including by *maras* (youth gangs). Migrants normally cross Mexico on their way to the United States or Canada, where an estimated 25-30 per cent of Central Americans are living today. In 2006, almost 180,000 migrants were intercepted at the Mexican border in Tapachula, according to figures by the Mexican National Migration Institute. Some 86,000 migrants were deported, amongst whom some 5,000 were unaccompanied minors.

Human smuggling and trafficking, especially of unaccompanied children, is widespread. In this context, UNHCR's presence in Tapachula, the principal border crossing between Central America and Mexico, has been essential to ensure that persons of concern to the Office can have access to international protection.

Achievements and impact

In line with the Mexico Plan of Action and UNHCR's 2006 Global Strategic Objective No.1, the Office continued to provide technical advice and support to governments in the region in order to ensure that national legislation complies with international refugee law. Although the political climate in 2006 was not conducive to achieving significant progress, UNHCR's ad hoc participation in refugee status determination helped to maintain minimum standards.



The deployment of a Child Protection Officer to Tapachula was essential to draw attention to the need to improve the protection of unaccompanied and separated children within migratory flows. In 2006, a comprehensive mapping exercise was carried out together with national and international partners to assess the protection needs of these children. The study revealed a wide spectrum of reasons for family separation: poverty, abandonment, violence, abuse, crime, lack of access to education and absence of hope for a better future. The Government's initial reaction to the study was positive although concerted action was interrupted as a result of a change in government counterparts in key positions. Once the situation stabilized, a more systematic relationship was established with relevant institutions. It is hoped that this will enable the introduction of standard operating procedures for unaccompanied and separated children in 2007, along with the formalization of a framework of cooperation among all partners.

The Regional Office in Mexico coordinated a pilot project on capacity-building for five Central American countries. The project was especially useful for border officials, some of whom had no previous knowledge of international refugee law.

Constraints

In Mexico, the programme was affected by political changes arising from the elections, including frequent management changes within UNHCR's main government counterpart, the National Commission for Refugee Assistance (COMAR). Consequently, a pilot project to receive resettled refugees was put on hold. Similarly, the process to establish a new asylum law and the drafting of a new decree regulating the asylum procedure came to a halt. There was also a high turnover of government officials in Central American countries, which had a negative impact on training activities.

Lack of employment opportunities in Mexico and Central America remained a major obstacle to refugee integration and self-sufficiency. Moreover, difficulties in regularizing the status of refugees proved a major constraint to local integration.

Operations

In 2006, the refugee population in the region remained constant at some 5,500 people. Six hundred and sixteen new asylum claims were registered, of which 480 were in Mexico.

The **Regional Office in Mexico** continued to provide legal and technical advice on individual asylum

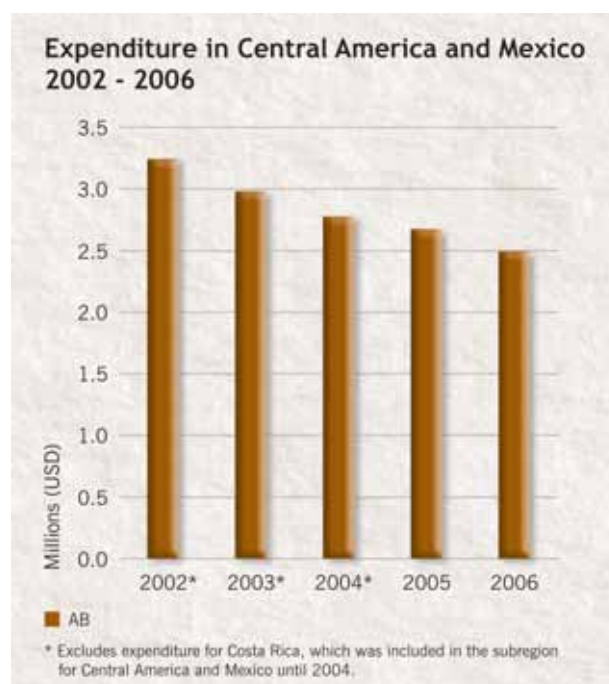
applications throughout the region. It also monitored claims of persecution by non-state actors related to gang violence, sexual violence against children and all forms of sexual and gender-based violence. The office in Mexico also administered programmes in Cuba (see North America and the Caribbean chapter for a description of activities).

UNHCR continued to advocate for the improvement of the existing asylum and refugee legislation in the countries of the subregion, which are all party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. The Office organized and participated in various seminars and workshops in order to build the capacity of its main interlocutors as well as potential ones, such as migration officials, judges and officials dealing with human rights and refugee issues.

Limited material assistance, such as subsistence allowances, lodging, medical attention and education grants were provided to the most vulnerable persons of concern.

Financial information

UNHCR's budget for the subregion was designed to cover only minimum assistance requirements for refugees, asylum-seekers and others of concern to the Office and limited administrative support for implementing partners. Since 2002, the number of refugees in the subregion has decreased and there has been a progressive reduction in expenditure levels. The 20 per cent capping of budgets in 2006 led to some restructuring of the Office and to reduced financial support for implementing partners.





UNHCR/M. Echandi

Refugee children learn about their rights through play at a party at Mexico City's Human Rights Commission.

Budget and expenditure (USD)

Country	AB	
	Final budget	Expenditure
Mexico	1,853,227	1,583,870
Regional activities ¹	936,155	909,003
Total	2,789,382	2,492,873

¹ Includes material and legal assistance to refugees in Mexico and Central America, promotion of refugee law, strengthening national capacities and public awareness raising.

Restricted voluntary contributions (USD)

Earmarking	Donor	AB
Central America and Mexico	Spain	7,725
	Sweden	251,256
	United States	660,000
	Sub-total	918,981
Mexico	Mexico	1,748
	Sub-total	1,748
Total		920,729