



# Northern South America

## Major developments

The continuing conflict in Colombia led many Colombians to seek protection in neighbouring Ecuador and Venezuela and, to a lesser extent, in Panama and Peru. In 2004, UNHCR improved access to the protection and assistance of persons of concern to the Office, especially in border areas; ensured that legal frameworks responded to the protection needs of refugees and asylum-seekers; and strengthened the protection networks. Incursions of illegal armed groups from Colombia into bordering territories, the identification of prominent Colombian guerrilla members in Ecuador and Venezuela, rising crime rates, kidnapping and drug trafficking led to a general mistrust among Colombians and increased security concerns in the countries bordering Colombia.

## Challenges and concerns

Security and fear of a spill-over of the Colombian conflict, with the presence of irregular armed groups, kidnappings and drug trafficking, were the prevailing concerns of the countries neighbouring Colombia. The border areas of Ecuador, Panama, and Venezuela, where many persons of concern live, are typically less developed in comparison to the rest of these countries. There was a tendency to attribute

Colombia  
Ecuador  
Guyana  
Panama  
Peru  
Suriname  
Venezuela



rising crime in these areas to Colombians. Many Colombians in need of protection did not seek asylum in these countries for fear of discrimination, deportation, lack of knowledge of their rights as asylum-seekers and slow RSD procedures. Therefore, one of UNHCR's main concern in the region was the invisibility of Colombians who fled their country because of violence. Far more than half a million Colombians are believed to have fled to neighbouring countries: some 270,000 in Venezuela, 250,000 in Ecuador, 100,000 in Panama, and 50,000 in Costa Rica. Although the Governments of Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela tried to improve security in these areas through increased control, it was difficult for them, as well as for UNHCR and its partners, to identify all persons in need of protection.

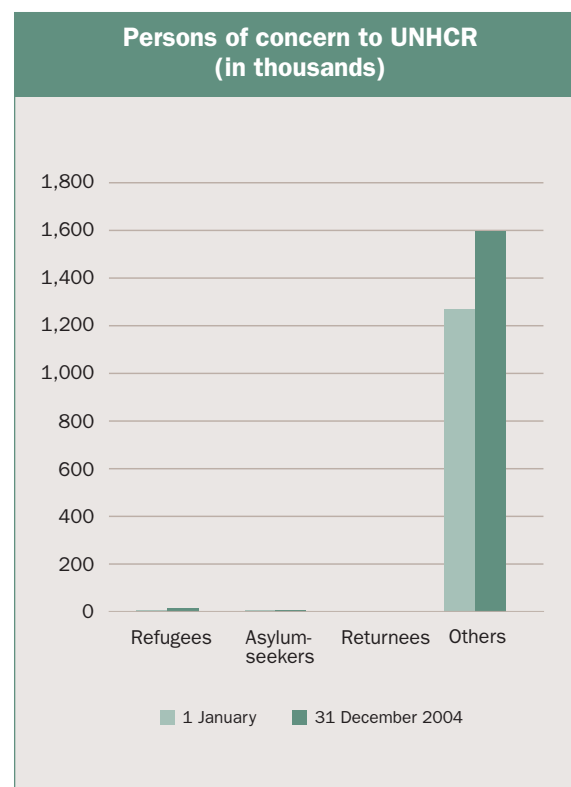
Following bilateral talks with Colombia in March, the Ecuadorian Government introduced the "*pasado judicial*" whereby all Colombians, including asylum-seekers, must provide proof of non-criminal record upon entry. The new requirement resulted in a 33 per cent decrease in the number of Colombian asylum-seekers. It may, however, have prompted many Colombians to enter the country illegally. Nonetheless, Ecuador remained the country that registered the highest number of new asylum-seekers in the subregion, with almost 30,000 persons having requested asylum since 2000.

In all main refugee-receiving countries of the region, UNHCR sought to strengthen and increase access to

national protection regimes, as well as to improve the self-reliance of refugees through community-based projects.

## Progress towards solutions

During its second year of existence, the resettlement unit based in Quito dealt with 620



refugees, of whom 440 had by year's end departed for various destinations. The majority of the cases were referred to the United States, followed by Canada. The Unit also submitted some 54 cases to Brazil and Chile. Among the 20 cases who went to Brazil during the year, six were single female heads of households.

In Ecuador, as a result of a joint WHO/UNHCR advocacy initiative, the Ministry of Health granted all refugees access to public health services under the same conditions as nationals. It also reaffirmed refugee women's access to free basic maternity assistance. Following a request from UNHCR, the Ministry of Culture and Education instructed schools to accept children without academic certificates and to test them in order to determine the appropriate class. As a follow-up to the visit to Ecuador by the United Nations Secretary-General in November 2003, UNHCR participated in the joint UN assessment of northern Ecuador, to address the humanitarian and development needs of the refugee-receiving communities along the border.

In Venezuela, the National Refugee Commission began to implement RSD procedures and the Regional Technical Secretariat in Táchira became operational and received 1,580 requests for asylum. In 2004, of some 4,000 requests submitted to the Commission, 400 were processed. In February 2004, the Government passed a temporary presidential decree which facilitated the naturalization and regularization of all irregular migrants. According to the Government, some 760,000 individuals were documented, of whom 567,000 were Colombians, many of them in need of international protection. These Colombians benefited from the decree without losing their refugee rights when they sought asylum. The Government of Venezuela also initiated social programmes which attended to the needs of the most marginalized sectors of society and host communities along the border.

After 15 months of inactivity, the National Refugee Commission in Panama resumed operations and met three times during the year. An *Accord de Siège* was signed in April, enabling UNHCR to establish a permanent presence in the capital city and at the border in the Darién province. In the context of bilateral agreements, the second repatriation movement took place in February, and 27 Colombians returned home from the Darién. UNHCR was invited as an observer and found that the repatriation was carried out in a

transparent manner with respect for the dignity of the persons concerned. For those Colombians under temporary protection status who opted to stay in Panama, the Government agreed, in principle, to regularize them on a case-by-case basis.

In 2004, UNHCR implemented successful pilot projects on gender and age in Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela, and multi-functional gender and age teams were established.

## Operations

UNHCR's operations for **Colombia** are described in a separate country chapter.

In **Ecuador**, 7,860 persons requested asylum (97 per cent Colombians). The National Eligibility Commission recognized 2,400 refugees in 52 sessions during the year. UNHCR provided vulnerable asylum-seekers and refugees with initial support including health care, accommodation (or rental subsidies), household items, hygiene kits and educational material (for 860 children), and WFP assisted with food rations. Some 190 adults enrolled in literacy classes and 40 refugees participated in vocational training courses. Twenty-four refugee students (83 per cent female) received scholarships from the DAFI Educational project. As in Panama and Venezuela, the Office also implemented Community Support and Integration Projects (CISPs) in Ecuador. Sixty CISPs were implemented in health, education, income generation and community services, benefiting more than 38,600 Colombians and their host communities. UNHCR conducted 37 training sessions on refugee protection for 2,280 army, navy and police staff, university students and journalists.

During the year, 350 persons requested asylum in **Panama**. The National Eligibility Commission recognized 50 persons, increasing the total refugee population to 1,610 persons. The Government agreed to start regularizing the population in border areas and, in preparation for this, 830 persons were assessed after a census. In this context, UNHCR organized registration campaigns conducted by the National Registration Office for children born in Panama, facilitated medical examinations, and issued identification documents for Colombians, and the certification of marriages of 23 Panamanian/Colombian couples. Refugees in border areas were supported with food, transportation, small infrastructure



Ecuador: Colombians can apply for asylum and receive legal advice as well as information on their asylum cases at the UNHCR office in Ibarra. UNHCR/B. Heger

projects, health and education assistance and 17 CISPs, including three community credit schemes which benefited some 3,500 persons. Income-generating projects were accorded special importance, with a view to decreased humanitarian assistance for refugees in future. By the end of the year, the micro-credit scheme, started in early 2004, had over 160 members and 65 credits had been approved mainly for small-scale agricultural projects. UNHCR conducted workshops for members of the Eligibility Commission and police and migration officers. Over 290 primary school pupils in the Darién and Kuna Yala province received uniforms and shoes, and 20 secondary school students obtained scholarships.

In an effort to streamline the CISP strategy in **Venezuela**, the Office held a regional workshop. As a result, a handbook on CISP framework and methodology was published for UNHCR and implementing partner staff in Ecuador, Panama and Venezuela. In total, 121 CISPs in health, education, income generation and community development were implemented in more than 60 host communities, benefiting some 26,360 persons. UNHCR promoted two educational campaigns targeting primary school children in the border area and strengthened protection networks within the host communities by training teachers to identify and understand the needs of refugee children. The Office also

distributed information pertaining to refugee rights and asylum application procedures to parents and provided housing allowances, household kits and health care to vulnerable asylum-seekers and refugees. Educational support was provided to over 470 refugee and local children in Venezuela and 26 in **Peru**. The Office provided emergency assistance to some 300 indigenous persons who crossed the border into Apure in April and August. In September, Venezuela hosted the second Regional Bishops' Meeting, which involved Catholic Bishops and implementing partners from countries affected by the Colombian situation.

In Northern South America, public information (PI) activities focused on the Colombia situation. In Venezuela, the Regional PI Unit continued to support the registration awareness campaign and UNHCR's training and capacity-building work with governmental authorities and partners.

## Funding

UNHCR kept donors informed of regional activities. The programme in Northern South America was actively supported by donors, whose number grew in 2004. Private sector contributions also grew significantly, particularly for Ecuador.

## Restricted voluntary contributions (USD)

Earmarking <sup>1</sup>	Donor	Annual programme budget
<b>Colombia</b>		
	<i>Association française de soutien à l'UNHCR</i>	24,871
	Australia for UNHCR	285,509
	Canada	381,679
	European Commission	1,688,657
	Giorgio Armani SPA	130,226
	Japan	500,000
	Japan Association for UNHCR	304
	Luxembourg	248,756
	Miscellaneous donors / Private donors in Italy	147,292
	Norway	777,605
	Spain	1,837,885
	<i>Stichting Vluchteling</i> (NED)	180,505
	Switzerland	396,825
	UN Trust Fund for Human Security	713,700
	United Kingdom	100,500
	United States of America	619,672
	USA for UNHCR	150
<b>Sub-total</b>		<b>8,034,137</b>
<b>Ecuador</b>		
	European Commission	763,359
	Germany	306,373
	Miscellaneous donors / Private donors in Italy	100,000
	Spain	74,860
	Switzerland	250,000
	United States of America	920,544
<b>Sub-total</b>		<b>2,415,136</b>
<b>Northern South America</b>		
	Sweden	824,176
	United States of America	1,500,000
<b>Sub-total</b>		<b>2,324,176</b>
<b>Panama</b>		
	United States of America	150,000
<b>Sub-total</b>		<b>150,000</b>
<b>Venezuela</b>		
	<i>Association française de soutien à l'UNHCR</i>	20,641
	Italy	245,098
	United States of America	453,520
<b>Sub-total</b>		<b>719,259</b>
<b>Total</b>		<b>13,642,707</b>

<sup>1</sup> For more information on earmarking, please refer to the donor profiles.

## Budget and expenditure (USD)

Country	Revised budget	Expenditure
	Annual programme budget	
Colombia	7,298,004	7,238,935
Ecuador	2,919,049	2,919,050
Panama	852,500	846,807
Venezuela	1,433,133	1,429,260
Regional projects <sup>1</sup>	984,589	984,589
<b>Total</b>	<b>13,487,275</b>	<b>13,418,641</b>

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