



Northern South America

Recent developments

The Colombian conflict continues to affect many areas of the country. This has led to a serious deterioration of the humanitarian situation, increased internal displacement, and refugee movements, mainly to Ecuador and Venezuela.

The heightened political instability in the region has influenced border security and refugee issues, contributed to a gradual militarization of border areas, and led to the establishment of security agreements between the Governments of Colombia and Ecuador, Panamá, and Venezuela. Increased insecurity has also hampered local integration of Colombians in neighbouring countries. As a result, UNHCR is concerned that strict migration control measures might weaken established protection regimes, and lead to restrictive asylum practices in the region.

While the Government of Ecuador continues to apply liberal criteria for the recognition of refugee status, since May 2004 it has required that every Colombian citizen who enters Ecuadorian territory

Colombia

Ecuador

Guyana

Panamá

Peru

Suriname

Venezuela



presents a "*pasado judicial*", a certificate issued in Colombia to show that the holder has no criminal record. The document is only issued in very few border locations, thus the requirement has severely reduced the number of Colombians who cross the border and meet the legal requirement.

In Panamá, a Headquarters Agreement was established between the Government and UNHCR in April 2004. This paves the way for UNHCR's permanent presence in the country. In mid-2004, the outgoing Government undertook a comprehensive registration of refugees, asylum-seekers and persons of concern at the border, and it is hoped that this will improve or regularize their stay in the country.

Strategic objectives

UNHCR's regional strategy continues to focus mainly in the border areas, to respond to the needs of Colombians through registration, documentation, humanitarian assistance, community-based projects, extended protection networks

and capacity building for State authorities. In 2005, UNHCR will: safeguard the right to seek asylum and access to assistance in the border and urban areas, where most refugees and asylum-seekers are located; enhance and consolidate the national protection frameworks of Ecuador, Panamá, Peru and Venezuela; and strengthen protection networks, especially in the border areas.

UNHCR will promote durable solutions for refugees, asylum-seekers and other persons of concern, by providing integration opportunities for long-term urban refugees, giving them greater legal and material security, while facilitating resettlement and voluntary repatriation for certain individual cases. At the time of writing, UNHCR will not facilitate the voluntary repatriation of Colombians due to the continuing precarious security situation in Colombia.

UNHCR will promote increased levels of self-sufficiency of the refugees through more intense coverage of border areas, and monitoring of host communities. In an effort to better integrate refugees into their host communities, a community development and integration programme (PACI) was created. This promotes income-generating

and community development projects for refugees and host communities in border areas. UNHCR's offices in Ecuador, Panamá, and Venezuela will produce a conceptual framework for the implementation of the programme. As part of the programme, UNHCR will promote credit schemes administered by the refugees themselves. These schemes have proven to be successful among refugees and the local population in these countries.

Operations

Although a decrease in asylum requests has been noted since the introduction of the "*pasado judicial*," **Ecuador** still continues to receive the highest number of Colombian asylum-seekers in the sub-region. During the first six months of 2004, almost 5,000 persons requested asylum. By August 2004, the total population of concern to UNHCR was some 28,000 persons.

Since the establishment of the Resettlement Unit in Quito in 2003, the use of resettlement as a protection tool, and as an effective durable solution, has had a marked positive effect for refugees in Ecuador, who are frequently rendered vulnerable by a variety of protection needs. By the end of 2004, UNHCR expects to have helped more than 600 individuals in this way - a number that the Office hopes to maintain in 2005. In addition to working with traditional resettlement countries such as Canada, Sweden, the Netherlands and the United States, UNHCR in Ecuador will also refer refugees for resettlement to emerging resettlement countries, notably Brazil and Chile.

With a new Government in place in **Panamá**, it is too early to analyze the Government's policies vis-à-vis refugee issues. However, it is hoped that the positive developments achieved in 2004 will continue. Among the most important of these is the presence at the border of ONPAR (National Office for Attention to Refugees). The opening of two ONPAR field offices will allow for enhanced cooperation with UNHCR, ensure better access to RSD procedures by potential asylum-seekers from Colombia, and lead to a decrease in the number of deportations. There are almost 2,000 registered persons of concern to UNHCR in the country. The

Office will nevertheless maintain a contingency plan in case of larger influxes.

In 2005, UNHCR will cover the basic needs of persons of concern in education, health and food security (through the provision of seeds and tools) in **Peru**. The Office will ensure the effectiveness of refugee status determination (RSD) by monitoring and training the staff of the Government's National Commission. UNHCR will also seek alternatives for urban individual cases in Lima through legal and self-sufficiency projects.

Venezuela received more than 3,500 asylum requests in the first eight months of 2004. Given the delays in the registration/documentation process, UNHCR has been registering asylum-seekers in the border areas, and issuing temporary documentation cards on behalf of the Government. For the coming year, the Office will finalize the registration software behind a centralized database, to which implementing partners will have direct access through the internet. UNHCR will also provide training on registration and RSD procedures for the staff of the Regional Technical Secretariats (responsible for RSD) in the States of Táchira, Apure and Zulia. In addition, the Office will organize workshops in refugee law for the Armed Services, Migration Department, the Ministry of Interior and Justice, and provincial authorities.

UNHCR will conduct mass media campaigns to highlight the plight of civilian victims of the





Venezuela: A doctor prepares to treat an infant for an eye infection. The UNHCR-sponsored clinic is the only place in El Cruce where Colombians seeking refugee status can go for medical treatment. *D. Rochkind/Polaris*

Colombian conflict, and its humanitarian consequences. The Office will carry out special training workshops for journalists covering refugee issues, and will develop campaigns to show the positive impact of the PACI.

Budget (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme
Colombia	7,031,686
Ecuador	3,340,811
Panamá	721,777
Venezuela	1,655,449
Regional activities ¹	1,025,001
Total	13,774,723

¹ Includes care and maintenance and durable solutions for refugees in countries in Northern South America.