

CENTRAL AMERICA

Belize,
Costa Rica,
El Salvador,
Guatemala,

Honduras,
Mexico,
Nicaragua.

CENTRAL AMERICA REGIONAL OVERVIEW

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Recent Developments

At the end of July 1999, the High Commissioner witnessed the official closure of the voluntary repatriation programme for Guatemalan refugees at a ceremony presided over by the President of Mexico, and attended by the President of Guatemala. This programme saw more than 43,000 refugees return to more than 160 different locations in Guatemala, almost 2,000 of them in 1999.

The local integration process in countries of asylum for Central American refugees was given a boost in 1999 when the provisions of the amnesty programmes for illegal aliens in Belize and Costa Rica were extended to refugees. The main benefit was the possibility of acquiring permanent residence. UNHCR and its NGO partners, have helped over 1,000 refugees prepare their appli-

cations for naturalisation. It is not yet known how many refugees applied for the amnesty in Costa Rica.

Strategic Objectives

In 2000, UNHCR's activities will continue to focus on: (i) empowering governmental and non-governmental institutions to protect, assist and integrate refugees on a sustainable basis; (ii) consolidating long-term solutions for long-staying Central American refugees in the region, principally through counselling and assistance, with local integration and support for individual voluntary repatriation; (iii) monitoring the overall situation of returnee communities in Guatemala and continuing to consolidate links with government actors, UN agencies, donors, local and international NGOs.

Operations

The population of concern to UNHCR in the region totalled about 54,300 at the end of June 1999. Nearly 93 per cent of the refugees assisted by UNHCR in this region are long-staying Central American refugees in the process of achieving full integration in their respective host countries. The remaining seven per cent are newly arrived refugees and asylum-seekers originating from a variety of countries, including Colombia. The number of refugees who require UNHCR's assistance to repatriate has tended to decline in the last few years to less than 300 a year. UNHCR's largest refugee programme in the region is in **Mexico**, which is covered in a separate chapter.

Contrary to original plans, continued UNHCR assistance with naturalisation applications will be required in 2000 in **Belize** for refugees unable to get citizenship in 1999. The number of eligible refugees was estimated at 1,200 in 1999. UNHCR's financial support will also be required to facilitate the acquisition of permanent residence status for more than 4,000 Central American families, predominantly Guatemalans, who registered under the 1999 amnesty and meet UNHCR's criteria for assistance.

In **Costa Rica**, UNHCR will continue to provide technical advice and support to the General Directorate for Migration and Aliens to complete the restructuring and modernisation of its Refugee Department, including a careful review of individual refugee files. The expected outcome is a strengthened, more efficient department providing a better service to asylum-seekers and refugees and a speedier refugee status determination procedure. A "train the trainers" programme will help build up the skills and resources of Government officials dealing with refugees, especially migration officials. Special assistance will address the specific problems of a small number of traumatised Colombian refugee women who arrived in Costa Rica on their own.

Building upon an initial series of training workshops for migration officers working at border points, UNHCR will do more of the same in **El Salvador** in 2000. Resource-building activities will also be aimed at UNHCR's national implementing partners. UNHCR will continue to encourage adoption of national refugee legislation and advise the technical inter-ministerial working group in charge of drafting the law.

UNHCR will continue to offer expertise and work closely with the newly reopened Refugee Section within the Migration Department of the Government of **Honduras**. UNHCR and its human rights NGO implementing partner will draw up a questionnaire for asylum claimants to complete at border points.

In **Guatemala**, UNHCR will pursue the adoption of national legislation and thereafter the establishment of a national eligibility structure. Within the Global Campaign on Accessions, UNHCR will encourage the Guatemalan Government to deposit the ratification instruments for the two statelessness conventions, which it signed several years ago. For the approximately 740 remaining Central American refugees, UNHCR will continue to support individual voluntary repatriation and local integration through acquisition of permanent residence status. On the returnee front, UNHCR will follow up protection issues in returnee communities established in 1998 and 1999 and continue to participate in regular meetings of the governmental Technical Commission for the Resettlement of Uprooted Populations with a view to having returnee areas included in national development plans.

Pending the adoption of new immigration legislation in **Nicaragua**, including several clauses dealing with refugees, UNHCR will help to further strengthen the existing ad hoc refugee status determination procedure carried out by the Aliens Section of the Migration Office. An important activity in 2000 will be practical training for employees of the various local branches of UNHCR's NGO partners in the country to raise their awareness of refugee issues.

CENTRAL AMERICA	
BUDGET (USD)	
Country	Annual Programme
Costa Rica	416,025
Guatemala	178,300
Mexico	6,604,932
Regional Project*	913,500
Sub-total	8,112,757
Bureau at Headquarters	523,100
Total	8,635,857

* Covers activities in Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico and Nicaragua.